City, Territory
and Architecture

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Authenti-City

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**Abstract**

The new global cities and megacities, which are generally planned and built as result of political decisions and fast economic growth, are considered artificial and "false" in their nature. This widespread perception arises from a cognitive dissociation between the notions of authenticity and identity in relation to memory, time and the city's own sedimentation. This perceived dichotomy is illustrated in the literature across the disciplines. Building on the work of Calvino, Burckhardt, Augé, Jacobs, Lynch, and others, this paper examines this question through the lens of sociology, architecture, literature, and philosophy. The goal of this dissertation, by means of dialectics, is to show how every city, even the most recent ones in terms of foundation and development, should be considered authentic. This paper argues that every city is a physical and socio-phenomenological expression of its residents. To support the study's thesis, the city of Dubai will be closely examined. Dubai is a city that has all the elements that contribute to this collective vision, as well as the reasons for refuting it. In conclusion, this article will demonstrate that people are the driving force of a city, including more recent cities. It will further show that the built environment is only a base or matrix in support of the "Authentic-City," a city made by people for people.

**Keywords:** Design theory, Authenticity, City identity, Social phenomenology, Cosmopolitan urbanism, Dubai

## Introduction

It's not unusual for recently planned cities (i.e. Dubai, Astana or Songdo) to be defined as "not real," "artificial," or "fake," especially when compared to historically-settled cities. Building on the work of Italo Calvino, Lucius Burckhardt, Marc Augé, Jane Jacobs, Kevin Lynch, Carlo Rovelli, and Aldo Rossi, this study demonstrates that the value of the "Authenti-City" should not reside uniquely with the city that is typically perceived as authentic as a result of its physical morphology. Instead, as this paper argues, the notion of "Authenti-City" depends on the people who make and live in their urban settlements, a key component of cities and their real authenticity. This paper provides an analysis that draws from scholarship across the disciplines including, architecture, philosophy, sociology, literature and physics, among others. It

proposes to investigate the question: "What is the meaning of "false" in relation to the idea of a city?".

Lucius Burckhardt defines broadly the term "false" as the result of a process of deconstruction and transposition of the intrinsic semantic value of the original (or supposed as such) into a new meaning that transcends it. It is an appropriation of content and symbols that cross the immanence of the objects themselves to acquire new, and sometimes unexpected, meanings (Burckhardt [2019], pp. 165–169). Are these new planned cities, which are born from *tabula rasa*, then, an imitation of other city models? Or do these cities transcend the "original" ones, surpassing them in their search for identity, and as a result, paradoxically speaking, they become more "real" than their reference models? Do these cities not perhaps represent a utopian idealization, manifested through the use of iconic symbols and a projection of the values of the so-called authentic cities?

## Time-related Urban stratification and the meaning of authenticity

The stratification of urban sediments relates to the concept of time and its own perception, which is based on

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the speed of change-processes and how these affect our own understanding. We commonly perceive and define as "authentic" something that has been transformed over the centuries, acquiring its own identity and settling into history. In this case, the temporal reference system we adopt is essential in developing an understanding of urban phenomenology. In fact, according to Aristotle, time is unique and related to the change of which it is the measure. By contrast, for Newton time is absolute, free from contingent and its flow. According to Einstein, time loses its uniqueness. There are countless times, as many as innumerable reference systems and masses involved. As Einstein showed, speed slows down time, it dilates it and relativizes it (Rovelli 2017). Moreover, when we talk about time, space is inevitably involved. Time and space cannot be separated. They are constitutive and founding elements of the same problem.

From the space–time dualism we obtain the macroscopic information of reality, the one that surrounds us. We acquire the superficial information, but perhaps we do not fully grasp the details. We remain on the surface, and are unable to identify its very essence, that is, the deepest and most hidden meaning of time. Time in the modern era has become relativized; it has lost its universal connotation. Leisure time is often no longer separated from working time. As well, the sphere of the "real" has inextricably merged with the "virtual" one. We are facing a sort of phenomenological expansion and bending of our Spacetime, similar to the one theorized by Albert Einstein. He defined Spacetime as a four-dimensional system. as well as we nowadays experience the dichotomy between real (based on three dimensions) and virtual (the fourth dimension) in our daily life.

At the same time, the notion of temporal relativism can also be applied to other aspects of research. In this regard, consider the conservation of historic architectural heritage. What is the original stage for the artifact to be preserved? Moreover, when we consider the restoration process, at what point should we halt the process of resurfacing the past? As well, which layer represents the "original" or the "false" past, given that each stratification contains an intrinsic historical truth? On this point, Burckhardt argues that the building-time relationship in the form of negating the past ideally demolishes the very meaning of those artifacts (Burckhardt 2019, pp. 40–41). Based on the above description, the space–time dimension must therefore be understood in "relative" and not "absolute" terms. There is no longer a single point of view on the matter, but rather, multiple perspectives that are applicable to the different contexts investigated.

According to this methodological approach, the vision of the city changes its narrative register. We are no longer faced with urban paradigms that have been de-historicized and de-contextualized by economic dynamics only. Rather, we are immersed in urban paradigms that are relativized by the speed of social and political processes in conjunction with technological and digital development. The speed of change, as we have underscored above, in itself relativizes. City sedimentation processes that in the past would have taken decades, if not centuries to develop, now take a few years, and sometimes, several months. This is due to new evolutionary factors or imponderable events, such as a new technology, revolutions, cataclysms or a pandemic.

Habits change and adapt, and cities change with them. This constitutes the founding part, the catalyst for all change, whether on a micro- or macro-scale. Drawing from the concept of fuzzy perception of the world described by Rovelli (2017, p.36) with regard to Boltzmann's ideas on the flow of time, we can argue that our perception of the city is also disjointed on several levels and based on a "cognitive blur". We too, as inhabitants of a city, perceive the urban dimension as a "place" at the smallest scale (the square, the street, the neighborhood, the village), while recognizing it contemporaneously as the "other" space, almost extraneous-corporeal on a macro-scale. These are perceptual gradients based on a "blurring" of the space–time dimension, similar to quantum matrix. Our perception of a macro reality loses its micro-dimensional vision and vice versa. The two are disjointed observation points that cannot be present at the same time in light of the different manifestations of the same phenomenon. The same thing occurs, by analogy, in quantum mechanics, that is, in the impossibility of being able to identify both the momentum and the position of a particle at a given instant (Principle of Complementarity by Niels Bohr). It is precisely this perceptual "blur," referred by Aldo Rossi as "urban facts," that prevents us from drawing a clear demarcation line between the before and the after, between the larger and the smaller scales, and between what we consider true and false. The history of urban planning is full of examples where the stratification of an ancient city has evolved over centuries. It's not only as a result of urban plans *in fieri,* but also and especially for the superimposition of an infinite and often impromptu sequence of building interventions. Examples in this case are Pompeii, European medieval cities and settlements, such as Kairouan in Tunisia and the Hutongs of Beijing, to name a few.

In a fragment of Anaximander's writings, the Greek philosopher states:

*"Things are transformed one into another according to necessity and render justice to one another according to the order of time."* (Anassimandro apud Rovelli 2017, p. 23).

Even today, many suburbs of contemporary cities are completely extraneous to any type of planning, as we see, for instance, in the slums of Rio, Bogotá or Nairobi. In this sense, each city, whether planned or not, represents a prototype, that is a unique model from which to draw lessons to define its archetype.

### "True" versus "false" Urban paradigms

It is clear that defining urban paradigms as "true" or "false" appears somewhat simplistic and refutable. In the history of cities, urban events and related reference cultures have always evolved in accordance to reciprocal interactions and through the use of commercial exchanges as vectors of change. An example in this case is represented by the Serenissima Republic in its thousand years of history. Over the centuries, the Republic maintained continuous economic and political ties with other civilizations. Middle Eastern models borrowed from Byzantine tradition profoundly influenced Venice's architectural and urban morphology. The paintings of Gentile Bellini and Carpaccio are a tangible historical testimony of such influences. Over time, Venice has appeared in countless iconographic representations, often based on metaphors. They were used as heterogeneous simulacra of a culture that at that time was in full development and growing strongly, both politically and economically.

In this case, Saint Mark's Basilica can be taken as an example. In fact, the Basilica follows the paradigm of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in its layout; its facades testify to Byzantine influence. Can we therefore define the Saint Mark's Basilica as "false" and the Hagia Sophia as "true" because the former is a typological and syntactic reference of the latter? Certainly not, especially because, within this narrative, the concept of exception is introduced, a concept which applies not only to the architectural field, but also to the urban one.

Italo Calvino explains it to us in the *Invisible Cities* in a moment when Marco Polo addresses Kublai Khan:

> *"I have also thought of a model city from which I deduce all the others," [...]. "It is a city made only of exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions. If such a city is the most improbable, by reducing the number of abnormal elements, we increase the probability that the city really exists. So, I have only to subtract exceptions from my model, and in whatever direction I proceed, I will arrive at one of the cities which, always as an exception, exist. But I cannot force my operation beyond a certain limit: I would achieve cities too probable to be real." (Calvino 1974, p.69).*

Therefore, exceptions and contradictions are integral to the evolution of an urban environment or city model.

They constitute the settlement matrix itself. Jane Jacobs identifies this matrix in the street (Jacobs 2020) in the same way that Kevin Lynch points to it in the very figurability of the city (Lynch 2020). We can say that it is the singularities of the cities themselves that create the identity of the *urbs*, that is, its authenticity. And what is unique we also know to be authentic, even if it derives its origin from a reference archetype.

### The role of utopia

The exception goes beyond the meaning of true or false, as well as the idea of pure and simple real, to transcend the realm of the desire for uniqueness, which is basically the dimension of utopia. Utopia can be expressed through the physical form of the city, and by political practice, activism and social welfare. These can also be considered icons, albeit, *sui generis*. Utopia is inextricably linked to the concept of an icon as an exception, revealing its unique, intrinsic and identity value. Franco Bernardi defines utopia's cathartic value as follows:

> *"[...] dystopia is the prevailing gestalt transformed into tangle; utopia is the possible disentangled".*
> *(Bernardi 2017, p. 137).*

In this sense, utopia acquires a liberating value as opposed to the dystopia of everyday reality. It extends beyond it and the icon represents its contingent operative element. The city needs the exceptional and the contrast between the ordinary and the special. From this dichotomy, the uniqueness of the specific urban dimension emerges in step with its originality.

As a germ of change, the icon embodies the physical and tangible projection of the future hidden in the dreamlike and rhetorical vision of utopia. In this regard, Burckhardt defines different types of utopias, namely, technical, urbanistic and "urban fiction" nature, among others. But it is in the decision-making process that he identifies the real will for change, which is typical of utopia itself. The true source of change is the "social utopia", the political will to channel myriad forms of resources to the service of an evolutionary vision for the future (Burckhardt 2019, pp. 45–54).

### The Dubai case

In this sense, Dubai appears to be an emblematic case, a unique sociological experiment prior to it becoming an economic model. Dubai is the most cosmopolitan city in the world. It is a city where more than 200 different nationalities live together, and 83% of its resident population is not local (International Organization for Migration 2015, p. 39). The city has experienced sudden and exponential growth since the 1960s as a result of the discovery and exploitation of oil resources. A focus on the

real estate sector, tourism and trading followed. In the collective imagination, Dubai is perceived as a recent city, developed without rules, except those dictated by the real estate market, and without historical stratification, due to its origins in a *tabula rasa* of the *locus* (the desert). This mainstream perception is supported by an economic-urban development model defined as "Dubaization," a concept that has been exported in the last twenty years to other geographical contexts (Elsheshtawy 2013, pp. 249–275). In just a few years, Dubai has become a universally recognized paradigm of bulimic real estate growth, and a point of reference for countries with ambitions of internationalization and strong economic expansion.

For the purposes of this article, it is imperative to identify the real intrinsic dynamics beyond Dubai's status, and understand why the city can be considered a "real" city in all intents and purposes. Dubai is commonly defined as inauthentic, or artificial, a sort of Las Vegas, because it lacks a historical stratification based on sedimentation and cultural and morphological adaptations due to time. It can be identified, in the first instance, simply as a transit place, or as an infinite collection of "non-places", as defined by Marc Augé (2015). However, as we evoked earlier, can we argue that more ancient cities are more authentic only because they are more settled? We show how there is a sort of "relativism" in the stratification of the *forma urbis* due to the speed of urban transformations in modern times. The interpretation of the city is based on urban facts, of which the icon is an integral part, as an exceptional component. It extends beyond the idea that utopia must be confined to the metaphysical sphere. Utopia can and must be real, even through the icon itself.

Let's take the emblematic case of the Al Yaqoub Building in Dubai which imitates London's Big Ben in its facade. The tower is imitated, not copied. Starting from the figurative simulacrum of reference, the Al Yaqoub Building becomes something else, not only on a functional level, but also in relation to the urban context with which it confronts and interfaces.

The comparison cited above could appear provocative, if not irreverent. However, it makes sense to provide a second level of interpretation. In fact, the distinction between what is "real" or what is not, is compared with the semantic definition of the term itself, which excludes the distinction between authentic-false since both "real" and "not-real" are part of the phenomenological sphere of reality. They are part of that transfiguration of meanings referred by Burckhardt, as discussed above. They belong to that "dynamic reality," fast and in constant evolution, which does not involve slow stratification, but rather an accelerated one. It is still a sedimentation. In the history of architecture, this is not an exceptional case.

## City representation

At other times and in other contexts, cities have sprung up from scratch within a few years, even in modern times, think of Chandigarh, Brasilia or Abuja, for example.

Born as utopias, they were subsequently confronted with contingent reality, quickly transforming into dystopias for their inhabitants.

In this regard, the documentary "*Brasilia: Life after Design*" testifies how the Brazilian capital has been transformed from a city symbolizing progress and a bright future to a place of human alienation, especially for the residents of the "Superquadras" (Simpson 2017).

This is because in the realization of urbanistic utopias we are not confronted with the dimension of the absolute, as represented, for example, in the "*Ideal City*" painting by Luciano Laurana. In this case, the city is not only built on exceptions, it is also blocked in its own timeless dimension, where there is no space for the human component. In this renowned art work there are no characters in the scenography, and consequently, the fixity of the scene crystallizes in its intrinsic figurative artificiality. This component is also present in De Chirico's more recent metaphysical representations, as well as in theatrical performances. In this regard, the Italian actor Gigi Proietti, declaiming of a sonnet by the Roman poet Trilussa (pseudonym of Carlo Alberto Salustri) is poignant. An excerpt reads:

> "*Viva er teatro, dove tutto è finto, ma niente c'è de farzo (...)." (GiFa VideoPro 2009).

Here, if we replaced the term theatre with city, we would therefore translate the text as: "Welcome to the city, where everything is not authentic, but nothing is fake".

Another example of overt artificiality is *Palm Jumeirah,* the only one of the three palm tree-like peninsulas, in addition to *The World* islands, situated along the Dubai coast, to have been completed and inhabited. This example is a case in point not only in relation to its iconographic and figurative representation, but also in its immanent anthropic component.

We could make it fall within the imaginative sphere of a utopia that, by extending the Burckhardt's classification, we would define as "commercial" or, more accurately, as "pragmatic," going so far as to identifying utopia by its own degeneration, as provocatively demonstrated in Erandi de Silva's artwork titled *Logopelago*. In this case, de Silva imagines future artificial islands in Dubai with different shapes, according to the logos of popular brands, such as Nike, Calvin Klein, Chanel, Ralph Lauren or Mickey Mouse (Basar et al. 2007).

## Urban planning factor

The settlement logic, in the case of *Logopelago*, is based on marketing its iconic-figurative component by means of media within the global economic market. This infers extending on a territorial scale, concepts and planning methods, demonstrated through the work of Venturi, Scott-Brown and Izenour concerning the Las Vegas Strip (Venturi et al. 2010). However, we cannot identify the urban form, born from a planned artificial process as false; and the authentic one (historically settled) as a result of unplanned extemporaneous events. A case in point is Venice, whose surrounding islands have also been claimed by the Lagoon. Other land reclamations have been carried out in other locations, transforming the geography of entire territories over the centuries.

When we consider the role of planning, Aldo Rossi (2018, pp. 121–122) identifies the urban plan as a primary element of the city, that is temporally determined. It represents an urban fact in itself, as a generator of future developments, and therefore, as a sort of primeval nucleus, one of the reading layers of the city itself. In the case of interventions that redefine the urban geography of a territory, we are faced with a vision that involves and represents the macro-scale of the city. At this level of cognitive perception of the urban form, every consideration of a place's inhabitants dissolves, echoed only in general discussions. This applies to the aforementioned case of Palm Jumeirah (Dubai) as well as to new real estate developments, we have considered earlier in our discussion.

This is a design myopia due to the dimensional shift in scale, where the intrinsic urban reality is filtered from the point of view itself and interpreted accordingly.

It is part of that blur or scale gradient, which we initially discussed and which Rovelli (2017) discusses in his explanation on concepts of matter and time in the relational interpretation of quantum mechanics. Described by Rovelli, physics theory is a representation of reality based on relationships; not as an expression of finite constitutive elements (Rovelli 2020). A probabilistic view of reality, the version formulated by Heisenberg and later developed by Bohr and others, raises the question between what it is and what it could be. This manifests itself as an inter-relationship between physical systems according to a network of connections that quantum mechanics defines as entangled (Rovelli 2020, pp. 106–109).

In the urban context, the discussion is raised on similar grounds. The city is *par excellence* the place of relationships, as already amply underscored in the urban-sociological research of Jane Jacobs and Kevin Lynch in the 1960s. Urban settlements were born out of and for, human interaction. They constitute the lifeblood, the foundation of urban settlements. Without human interaction, all planning is bound to fail, as we witnessed for example in the case of New Ordos and Ordos 100 project, and the emblematic Chinese "Ghost Towns" born from short-sighted urban planning.

## Conclusions

If we return to the case of Dubai, the scenario is starkly different and contrasting in many ways. The city was born from a historically identified nucleus, mentioned in the travel diaries of the Venetian merchant, Gaspero Balbi as early as 1587 and subsequently reported in the maps of Lieutenant Cogan in 1822 (Dubai Municipality 2010, p.9). More recently, in the past 70 years, Dubai was transformed from a village of fishermen and traders into a large cosmopolitan city. Its identity, however, remains present along the Creek, where the primitive nucleus is located, and in the areas of Deira and Bur Dubai, where the city lacks the sparkle found in Downtown or Marina.

As a result, a new reality is revealed, which from an urban point of view coincides with a series of morphological stratifications and social transformations that have emerged in the recent past.

The city's daily ritual is different, as are its inhabitants and its workers earning low to medium wages. A situation that is common to many other cities in the world emerges in Dubai: the dissemination of residents in a territory that is inhabited according to varying levels of socio-economic conditions.

However, it is worth noting that only by decreasing the scale we are able to focus on the most intimate reality, resulting in the identification of each of its individual components. And it is precisely their uniqueness that defines their identity, going beyond the authentic-false binomial. This distinction is defined by the relationship that each building establishes with the urban context that surrounds it, or the context that the city's various components determine among themselves. It is also and above all defined by the true and most profound founding element of any place: the inhabitants themselves. The real, and therefore "true" component of any city is made up of the people who live and work in these places. It constitutes its identity and most authentic matrix. We can find something dissimilar in the work of the Alinari Brothers who, in the mid-nineteenth century, represented a series of figuratively perfect and balanced photographs of Italian cities. Theirs was a representation of urban spaces, which overshadowed the aspect of man-urban space interaction. The high point of view, the absence in many cases of human figures within the frame and the centrality of the perspective contributed to creating a sort of figurative artificiality, almost detached from real life and the city's daily rituals. In fact, reality is often different from its representation. As we know, people interact with the built environment and it is based on this relationship

that the uniqueness of places emerges. This is the case for Dubai as well as any other urban context. In describing this kind of synergy that is present in neighborhoods such as Karama or Deira, Elsheshtawy writes:

> *"There is no permanence anywhere. Interestingly, [...] people are not passive, and even within these anonymous settings, and under adverse economic conditions, they are able to give meaning to these spaces— and perhaps for a brief period of time make them into places". (Elsheshtawy 2013, p. 244)*

Ultimately, the *Authenti-City* is identified not only by its physicality, but also by its intangibility, composed of a pulsating swarm of people, relationships and emotions. Indeed, as Shakespeare noted over four centuries ago:

*"What is the city but people?"* (Shakespeare 1607−1608, Act 3, Scene 1).

## Declarations

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