



Dubai: A Narrative of Places Shaped for Global Flows

Hussam SALAMA, Assistant Professor
National Research Center
hssalama@gmail.com

This paper discusses the trends of urban transformation development that have been shaping the urban form of Dubai during the last decade. I argue that Dubai presents a new prototype of globalizing cities aiming to become core players in the global arena. The city is relying on what I call “places of flows” which primarily aim to attract global flows of capital, people, information and ideas to its local context and accordingly, can upgrade its ‘world city’ status. The city is in fact being shaped for global flows more than by it. In other words, Dubai is simply reversing the process experienced by core world cities such as New York and Los Angeles where urban forms were transformed gradually to fulfill the continuously emerging needs of globalization.

As a “semi peripheral world city,” using John Friedmann’s categorization, Dubai is constructing an urban structure that has the capacity of triggering intense flows of capital, people, information and ideas. Most of the urban transformation projects that have emerged in the city during the last decade have focused on creating a series of places that can serve this quest. They tend to act as nodes of agglomeration of global flows. Besides, these places were mainly designed to attract global attention by their spectacular forms, extravagant nature and huge scales.

In this paper, I present three examples of these places of flows in Dubai. The first case study is Dubai Financial City, a place that primarily aims to intensify flows of global capital between Dubai and the global domain. This city includes Dubai International Financial Centre and Dubai Stock Market or NASDAQ Dubai. The second example is Dubai Mall, a 9,000,000 ft² of shopping retail space that is designed to host 1200 stores making it one of the largest shopping centers in the world. This place, like many other spectacular entertainment projects, aims to attract millions of tourists to Dubai every year. The third example is Dubai Media City, a huge complex that hosts top world enterprises specialized in information technology, media production, and communications such as IBM, Oracle, Microsoft and CNN.

This study aims to highlight the particularity of the nature of urban transformation development in a globalizing city like Dubai. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing the distinctions between the process of urban transformation that is currently occurring in many globalizing cities on the one hand and the process experienced by top world cities on the other. Hypothesis on global cities don’t necessarily explain the nature of globalizing ones. Global cities have been transformed over time in response to global flows where a globalizing like Dubai is transforming itself for the sake of these flows.

KEY WORDS: Dubai, places of flows, globalizing cities, global flows.