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## PRESENT AND FUTURE OF PUBLIC SPACES IN DUBAI

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Dubai was a real laboratory for urban planning that declaredly aimed at renewing the image of the city in the Middle East, clearly detached from the clichés of the Arab city.
- Constant control are leading to the sterilization of public space, purifying it of all those factors that make it a vital and dynamic component.
- A critical approach to new designs is needed, which cannot aim at rigid and definitive forms, but must aim at adaptation, evolution and diversification of space and society.
- Expo 2020 can be an opportunity to revitalize and rethink the idea of public open spaces within the city.

### ABSTRACT

The paper traces the debate that emerged during the "Mediterranean Urban Design & Regeneration Event" at the Italian Pavilion of Dubai Expo 2020, in which a representative of the Department of Architecture ("Gabriele d'Annunzio" University of Chieti-Pescara), together with Middle Eastern universities, discussed the future of public spaces in Dubai, retracing the history of its urban development and outlining strategic guidelines for the regeneration of some pilot areas, identified in the consolidated urban fabric. This initiative was promoted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, following a call for proposals on the topic "Connecting Minds, Creating the Future", a focus on aspects related to opportunities, mobility sustainability both from a material point of view (infrastructures and environmental resources), and from an intangible point of view, through the sharing of creative content and experiences and the dissemination of innovative cultural and scientific projects.

Through online meetings (including with partners from the schools of architecture and engineering in Dubai and Abu Dhabi) and then over the course of six in-person panel discussions, our proposed intensive workshop sought to spark a dialogue between two different approaches to urban design, the Mediterranean and the Middle Eastern, using the context of Dubai, the global capital of capitalism and neoliberal urbanism, as a kind of "stress test" for the concept of public open space.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The contribution returns part of the reflections born during the "Mediterranean Urban Design & Regeneration Event" promoted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation within the Italian Pavilion of Expo 2020, during the week dedicated to the topic Urban & Rural Development, focus areas Cities & Informal Settlements. The Department of Architecture of the "Gabriele d'Annunzio" University of Chieti-Pescara, through its delegation composed of professors and PhD students, led an instant workshop (Work & Play Event), with the slogan "Create Your Urban Agora". The objective of the activity was to lead the debate to the formulation of proposals on the topic of open spaces as opportunities for social encounter and interaction and a forum for discussion, with a look at the performance of the same spaces with respect to climate change issues. The format was developed to involve students and visitors to the Pavilion in an experiment of co-design, preceded by activities carried out remotely, with a phase of publicity and communication of the event, flanked by moments of discussion and focus on certain issues, carried out on the main social media, along with the preparation by the staff of reports and background documents in order to be able to carry out the activity in the best possible way during the workshop and to be distributed to the participants. The in-person activity was carried out in 6 working tables, each led by a senior scholar and a PhD student from the University of Pescara. Around the tables local students and visitors gathered to analyze the critical issues of the two selected study areas (Mall of Emirates and Dubai World Trade Center) and to brainstorm about initial design hypotheses. The conclusion of the workshop was a final presentation of the reflections and design proposals developed by each working group, enriched by critical reflections and suggestions from local consultants. The following contribution is the outcome of one of these working tables, conducted by the authors<sup>1</sup>, and is divided into two main parts: a first part deals with the urban form and function of Dubai, with focuses on some aspects that make the Emirates metropolis a unique case globally; concluding with a reflection on plans for the future development of public spaces and mobility, and a second part that applies some of these considerations at a smaller scale to the Mall of Emirates' case study, which through the regeneration of its spaces and the inclusion of new func-

tions lends itself to becoming a useful pilot project for the regeneration of other open spaces with similar characteristics in the same context.

## 2. A LOOK AT THE CITY

### 2.1 Five key points of discussion

A first point of discussion concerned the ownership status of public spaces in Dubai, spaces that are almost entirely privately owned, although partially open to public use. Known in the literature as POPS (Privately Owned Public Space) these spaces are subject to rules, regarding uses and behaviors, dictated by the property. Some typical characteristics derive from it, such as access restrictions, often due to user selection (based on wealth and ethnicity) and other times the willingness to pay an entrance ticket; restrictions on personal and political expression; the rules on clothing, especially concerning the female gender, subject to strict dressing codes, such as the one that requires the wearing of abaya and hijab or niqab. In some of these POPS, in particular in the shopping malls, the so-called "courtesy policies", which govern behavior and clothing, are reinforced by the constant presence of security officers and video surveillance (CCTV Cameras). Connected to the first point, the second concerned the constant control of the behavior of the local population (turning a blind eye to those of tourists), which are leading to the sterilization of public space, purifying it of all those factors that make it a vital and dynamic component in a city: freedom of access and use, inclusion of users from all geographic origin and social backgrounds, the presence of accessible commercial activities (and not only for very wealthy customers) and places for socio-cultural exchange, and others. Without these components, a public space is configured as a parody, where it is not possible to exercise one's citizenship rights but only to walk and admire the obscene ostentation of luxury (Sardar, 2013). A third point that was immediately observed, thanks also to the inspections carried out during the stay in the city, is the progressive and unstoppable interiorization of public spaces in commercial containers, equipped with very efficient air conditioning systems and all the comforts particularly appreciated by the city users, as well as the population from the UAE.

The success of shopping malls is also partly due to the fact that the Emirati community considers them safe spaces, because they are subject to controls, and morally acceptable for their wives and daughters (Reichenbach, 2015). The corridors and cafes of the malls thus become substitutes for spaces for socializing, where you can spend time with friends, in a protected and controlled environment. Promiscuity with visitors, tourists and expats is also an added value, which offers a further reason of interest for those who want to enjoy a moment of relaxation by the stringent rules of conduct, without however breaking the rules. In these indoor and domesticated spaces, where the distinctions between the private and public spheres are blurred, the achievements of Arab modernity are celebrated: climate comfort, consumption and the anxiety of control and security. A fourth point that emerged from the discussions at the tables concerned the disappearance of the street in its role as a primary element in the network of public spaces, as well as a connecting corridor. For Marcel Roncayolo the street was the public place par excellence, where public alludes not only to the owner statute and the manager, but also to the collective and free use that can be made of it: "Sauf dans des conditions assez exceptionnelles, la voie publique est l'endroit où tout le monde peut se retrouver, quelles que soient les origines ou les occupations et dans une certaine mesure, le règles de conduite" (Roncayolo, 1993). Roncayolo compares this vision with that formulated later by Modernity, which produces, through the separation between the different flows of vehicular and pedestrian mobility, the segregation of public space and the consequent failure in terms of relational potential. "Ce que l'on a vécu, à mon avis, avec la crise du Mouvement moderne, suite à sa tentative de ségrégation des espaces de circulation, c'est l'impossibilité de créer des espaces de circulation, c'est l'impossibilité de créer des espaces de fréquentation. À partir du moment où la circulation automobile était isolée, le logements'y retrouvait opposé. Entre les deux, on ne savait pas ce qu'on faisait. Une sorte de no man's land s'établissait there where y avait auparavant une interférence. Je crois que c'est l'un des grands drames" (Roncayolo, 1993). Precisely this specialization and separation of vehicular flows has caused in Dubai, as in other metropolises, the progressive disappearance of the street intended as a primary element of public space. Moreover, the safety and ostentation requirements of one's social status also push

the local community (except for foreign workers and expats) to use private cars for all journeys, carefully avoiding public transport, which is considered unsafe, as well as unbecoming for women. A fifth point clarified during the preliminary discussions concerned the functionalist and modernist matrix that inspired the planning of the metropolis. The principles on which the infrastructural networks were conceived, the distribution and location of the buildings privilege concepts such as the hierarchical ordering of roads; the prevalence of individual vehicle mobility; the direct connection of large equipment with the main communication routes; the reduction of the spatial density and corresponding increase of the heights etc.

### 2.2 The Dubai model and the anti-traditionalist approach

But to understand how the city under our eyes has given shape to its public spaces, we need to look at the recent past and at what has been defined as the "Dubai Model". A model that, throughout the Eighties and Nineties, was a real laboratory for urban planning that declaredly aimed at renewing the image of the city in the Middle East, clearly detached from the clichés of the Arab city, made of low-rise, high-density tissues that represented Arcadia and tradition. One of the most striking gestures of the liberal and anti-traditionalist approach to urban planning of the emirate was expressed with the construction of the artificial island of Burj al Arab, a sort of offshore urbanism (Petti, 2008) motivated by the need to establish a casino disliked by the religious communities of Saudi Arabia on a soil that was not the sacred ground of Islam, a heterotopia necessary to avoid religious conflicts between the small emirate of Dubai and the Saudi emirates and to hold together the principles of Islam and those of turbo-capitalism (Ibidem, 2008). If we try to put to work, in the description of public spaces in Dubai, the three categories of outdoor activities that, according to Ian Gehl, normally take place in public space, that is, the "necessary activities", the "optional activities" and "social activities", one would be led to say that in Dubai only the first category, that of necessary activities (i.e. the daily tasks and duties that the people concerned are required to do), take place in public spaces. On closer inspection, not even all of them, since some of them, such as going to school or work, take place indoors in cars, taxis and (for the less well-off) in public transport. For





**Figure 1:** A comparison between Dubai in 1984 and in 2020. Source: own elaboration.

the rest, that is optional activities, such as walking or sitting on a bench in a park, and social activities, namely those activities whose performance “depends on the presence of other people in the same public spaces” (Gehl, 2012, p. 26) are very rare and limited at certain times of the year and day, when the climatic conditions are more favorable, or, as we have seen, confined to in-door spaces such as commercial malls, losing important attributes, such as freedom and spontaneity. So, from this brief reconstruction Dubai emerges more and more as a city custom-made for real estate companies, constantly moving away from what the past represents, where public spaces take on new roles and meanings, gradually becoming a product for the use and consumption of tourists: a well-kept space from which to admire the extrav-

agant architecture (and from the Guinness Book of Records) and the luxurious shops windows.

### 2.3 Among climate conditions and energy consumption: plans for the future of public spaces

Dubai’s “instant” urban development (fig.1), known as “Dubaiization” (Alawadi, 2016), has been the promoter of large-scale projects referenced by iconic American architecture, and has espoused ideas from economic liberalism, particularly in the 1970-1990 period, characterized by the strong economic boost from the discovery of oil reserves, when John Harris’ master plans drew a car-friendly city with large infrastructure to enhance fast transportation and commercial

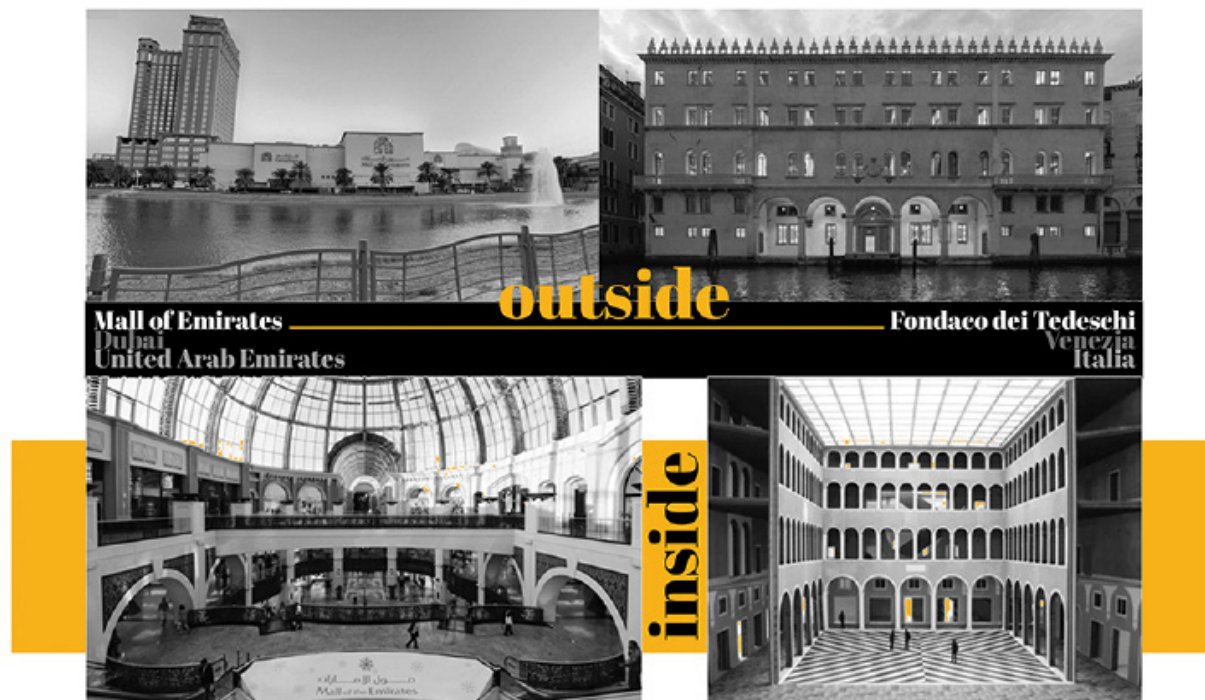
traffic. The next phase, from 1990 to the current, has been characterized by a form of urban globalization marked almost exclusively by real estate speculation and tourism (Virtudes A. et al, 2017). If in the present it lives, therefore, like Calvino’s *Diomira*<sup>2</sup>, of a succession of scenic elements that do not enjoy an identity matrix such as to enshrine its uniqueness in the international panorama, in the future, and in particular in the master plan of “Dubai 2040”<sup>3</sup>, the aim is to build a metamemory based on happiness and quality of life for citizens, residents and visitors. The vision of this master plan is to make the city a model for sustainable urban development by 2040, through a series of key objectives that cross-cuttingly involve the environment, heritage and people, whether citizens or users: the strengthening of consolidated urban areas, the development of vibrant and inclusive communities, the doubling of green areas, the improvement of environmental sustainability, the implementation of sustainable mobility networks and the preservation of cultural and urban herit-

age, with actions that strengthen its identity link with citizens, are envisaged. It will thus be the experience of well-being and happiness that will be imprinted in the memory of those who encounter this urban reality. The evolution of the goals set out in this master plan, compared to the historic masterplans of 1960 and 1971, represents a turning point, which, at least in theory, gives hope for a change of course and gives us as planners the opportunity to insert ourselves with ideas, references and research from well-established experiences working on these issues. At the same time, in order to pursue the goals of well-being and happiness of Dubai 2040, a critical approach to new designs is needed, which cannot aim at rigid and definitive forms, but must aim at adaptation, evolution and diversification of space and society: If a “New Urbanism” exists, it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence, but will consist of a scenario of uncertainty. [...] It will no longer aim at stable configurations, but at the creation of fields that are capable of accommodating pro-



**Figure 2:** Interior of the Dubai Mall. Source: Public domain [[https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dubai\\_Mall#/media/File:081106\\_Dubai\\_Mall\\_-\\_patio\\_mi-vide.jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dubai_Mall#/media/File:081106_Dubai_Mall_-_patio_mi-vide.jpg)].





**Figure 3:** Comparison of Mall of Emirates and Fondaco dei Tedeschi. *Source: own elaboration.*

cesses that refuse to be crystallized into definitive forms. [...] Its only obsession will no longer be the city, but the manipulation of infrastructure with a view to continuous intensification and diversification, shortcuts and redistribution - the reinvention of a psychological space" (Koolhaas, 2021).

### 3. MALL OF EMIRATES: A CASE STUDY

#### 3.1 Public spaces and users

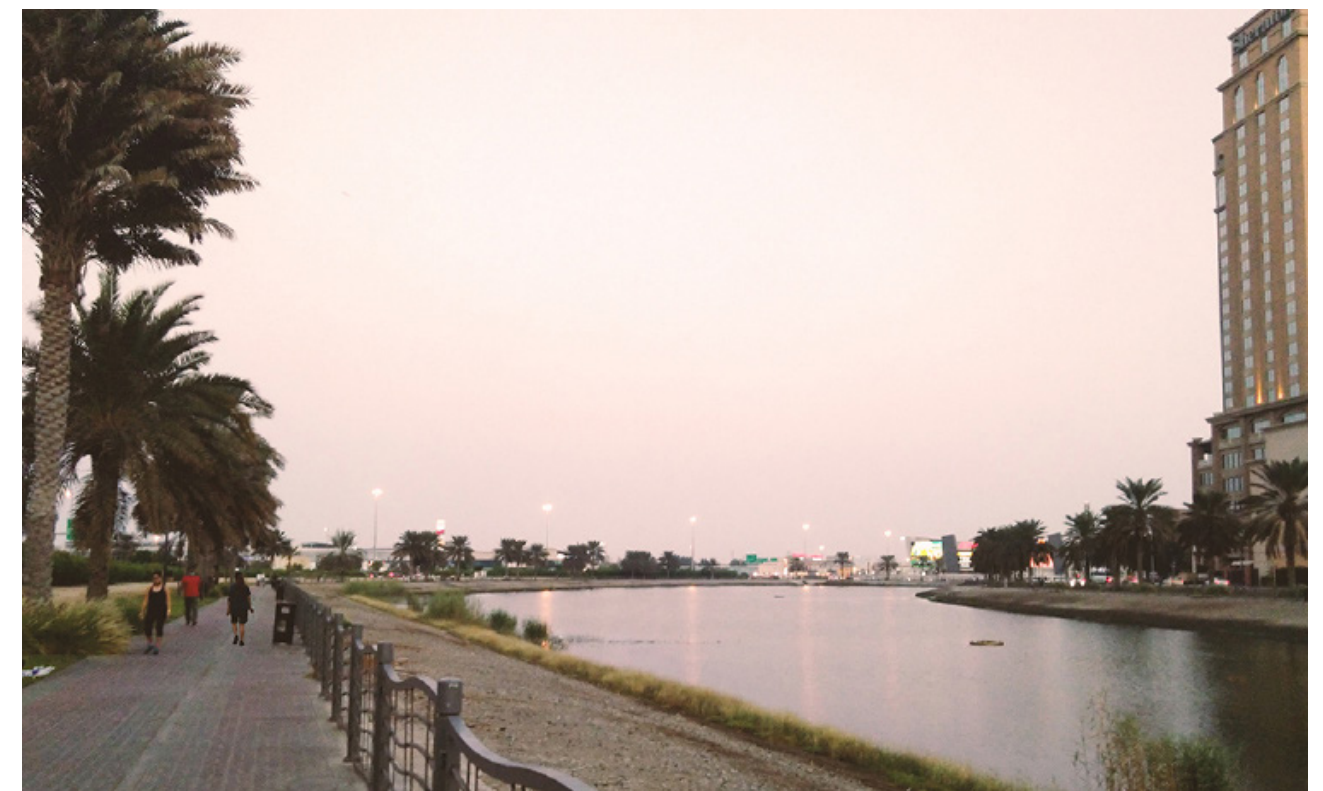
While it is true that, more than architects and urban planners, the people using the space create the places (Worpole and Knox 2007), the first consideration that has arisen relates to the communities settled in Dubai, which fully reflects the composition of the population nationwide<sup>4</sup>: this is a small percentage of local Arabs, about 8 percent of the total, combined with a large number of expatriates from mainly Asian and African countries, representing 92 percent of the population<sup>5</sup>. Looking at the reasons for this social composition brings the attention back to the city's extensive urban development since the 1990s, when in order

to encourage the influx of foreigners and compensate for the low number of residents, an unprecedented settlement development was started, transforming the desert into a city in just over 30 years. Such a diverse social composition is an added value for the metropolis, which we can imagine as a large-scale transposition of the community of monastic people on Mount Athos, recounted by essayist Roland Barthes, where each individual lived at his own pace, in harmony with the rest of society (Coste and Clerc, 2002): it is precisely this set of "rhythms" that gives form and life to the city, shaping its configuration. At the same time, such richness underscores how important it is to think about the regeneration of parts of the city with the main goal of improving the living conditions of its inhabitants, and to question the ways in which the city is experienced, how global processes affect local situations and housing patterns. Inclusive and flexible open spaces can be thought, that can accommodate and bring together as much as possible the needs of the resident population, which become places for discussion and sociability. But in the urban situation of Dubai, the main public spaces of free access and gathering for the entire population are mostly represented by the large shopping malls (fig.2) and the large corridors and the wide mall lobbies become the hub of relationships

(fig.3). This is why the large open spaces alongside these facilities hardly enjoy the same popularity, in terms of user turnout, as they do inside the buildings themselves, the accomplice being both the socio-cultural and weather factors that make it almost impossible to stay outdoors in the summer months. In the specific case of the Mall of Emirates Park, the users are almost entirely either employees, who decide to spend their lunch break there, or the Mall users themselves, who pass through the park on their way to the subway station. A direct exploration has revealed how the bike path surrounding the reservoir is particularly used in the evening hours, just after sunset, both for sports activities and for stopping and relaxing (fig.4). Directly observing how these spaces are experienced is the basis of any design consideration, as animation by inhabitants allows them to contribute to the city-building process: their daily practices and the social interactions that are woven into it can shape and reinvent the streetscape (Kyriazis et al., 2021). Choosing to exclude these large empty spaces from the frenzy to fill, as Koolhaas calls it, allows the emptiness itself, the landscape and the space to become levers capable of eliciting total adherence from anyone (Koolhaas, 2021).

#### 3.2 Between public and private spaces: POPS in Dubai

"Dubai owes its early survival and its current momentum to trading. Everything points to consumption. [...] Buildings are held together by proximity. There is no layering. Since the early landscape has been barren, anything goes and anything is new. The city has definitely ceased to be a site: instead, it has become a condition" (Katodrytis, 2019). This concise and clear definition of the urban condition of Dubai summarizes not only the idea that matured in our imagination already in the discussion phase prior to the event hosted during Expo 2020, but also clearly describes the image that the metropolis returns of itself to the observer who is relating to it for the first time. It feels as if we have been catapulted into the Metropolis illustrated by Paul Citroen in his collages (fig.5), to such an extent that questions have often been raised during the debate about whether it is actually possible to have open public spaces on which to graft new projects. One of the possible solutions is to think about the built environment, which is composed of buildings that are not to be considered as isolated elements, but are endowed with their own



**Figure 4:** The Mall of Emirates Park at sunset. *Source: Photo by Valentina Ciuffreda.*





**Figure 5:** Dubai. Collage loosely inspired by Paul Citroen's Metropolis. *Source: own elaboration.*

internal dynamics, which are constructed in the way they enter into relationship with each other, with infrastructure and free spaces, or with nature (Sennett, 2018). From this point of view, the opportunity offered by the area behind the Mall of Emirates is valuable both for the richness from the material point of view, given by the artificial

basin around which a dirt and partly tree-lined promenade is arranged, and for the replicability of the strategy, since the relationship between the long covered walkway leading directly from the subway station to the Mall and the space below, flanked by the presence of driveways of considerable size, is a recurring condition in several



**Figure 6:** The layering of infrastructure in the relationship between Mall and Metropolis. *Source: Photo by Valentina Ciuffreda.*



sites in Dubai (fig.6). The first question that arises is: what to do then with this space? An informal public space that is fully accessible, but difficult to manage and maintain, or POPS<sup>6</sup>, along the lines of the virtuous experiences in Dubai in recent years? To answer this question, a brief examination of either spatial typology is necessary to identify the points of connection with the strategic proposal. In the study context, we cannot reintroduce the concept of “public space” as it has become established in our culture and more generally in that of Western societies, as the idea of a “free space,” as we are inclined to think of it and design it, is not present here, and most usable open spaces can be defined as POPS, that is, spaces with clear regulations establishing the rules of their use and with supervisory personnel to ensure that these rules are observed. They are often spaces linked to the commercial function, which excludes from fruition, already in the design premises, all segments of the population that cannot economically afford this experience. They are open-air commercial spaces that take advantage of the quality of the landscape in which they fit, as in the case of “The Beach” in the Jumeirah Beach Residence or the “City Walk” that are interfaced with the coast, or the “Culture Village” and “Dubai Creek Harbour” that attempt to consolidate a relationship with the canal, both attractively and functionally, by allowing it to be crossed, or they are complex projects, as in the case of the Dubai International Financial Center, which divides vehicular and pedestrian flows, which take place at a higher level and meet, again, a range of receptive and commercial activities. Thinking of such a development for the Mall of Emirates area would certainly be the easiest way forward, proposing to the private individuals who run the Mall a project that would add some outdoor recreational activities that would build a continuum with the indoor commercial space. In the opposite direction, corroborated by the heterogeneity of population and customs, the development of informal relationship spaces comes to life, particularly in the suburbs of the Dubai metropolis. Informal public space, as opposed to the already presented case of POPS, is an open space used spontaneously, which does not arise from careful planning: it is an informal public space, an unbuilt portion of the city, a square, part of a street. It is, as Kyriazis defines it: “[...] the element of surprise on a highly regulated stage. It is the art of improvisation within a saturated space. It expresses the urge of escaping from the quotidian

struggles. It is a constant reminder of the shortcomings of city planning and its community provisions. And despite efforts to demonise it, it is the manifestation of a healthy, active city” (Kyriazis et al., 2021). It emerges, from the direct accounts of those who live in the city, that these are sometimes spaces that are used by families, who spend a large part of the day here, especially on holidays, transforming it into a place of rest and recreation, even stopping for many hours of the day; on the other hand, these are places frequented in the evening hours by the younger segment of the population, who experience these spaces as places of encounter and exchange through the most diverse forms of expression, changing the meaning of empty spaces into “urban reserves for the experimentation of collective dreams” (Breek and de Graad, 2001): it is the individual intelligence, engaged in the search for better conditions of existence that constructs these informal modes of confrontation with the “official” city, and that in this confrontation exploits the folds of space to claim rights of citizenship (Borja, 2003). The desire to experience these residual spaces of the metropolis represents a “combination of place and process that is at the origin of the form of the city, in its extraordinary variety, in the richness of declinations, in the boredom of imitations” (Caudo, 2010), and the resources that are obtained from the relationships become a public good available to society: they arise from the exploration of the existing and confront the plurality of inhabited worlds. Imagining such unpredictable development for the project area is an interesting challenge that would lead us, rather than designing space, to trigger processes capable of “disrupting a constituted spatial order, positioning itself where the market has temporarily looked away, recycling parts of the city in penumbra. Without the pretense of bringing light to these places. Rather to make them work, against the existing city, like woodworms, with the will to retract rules and arrangements” (Sampieri, 2014).

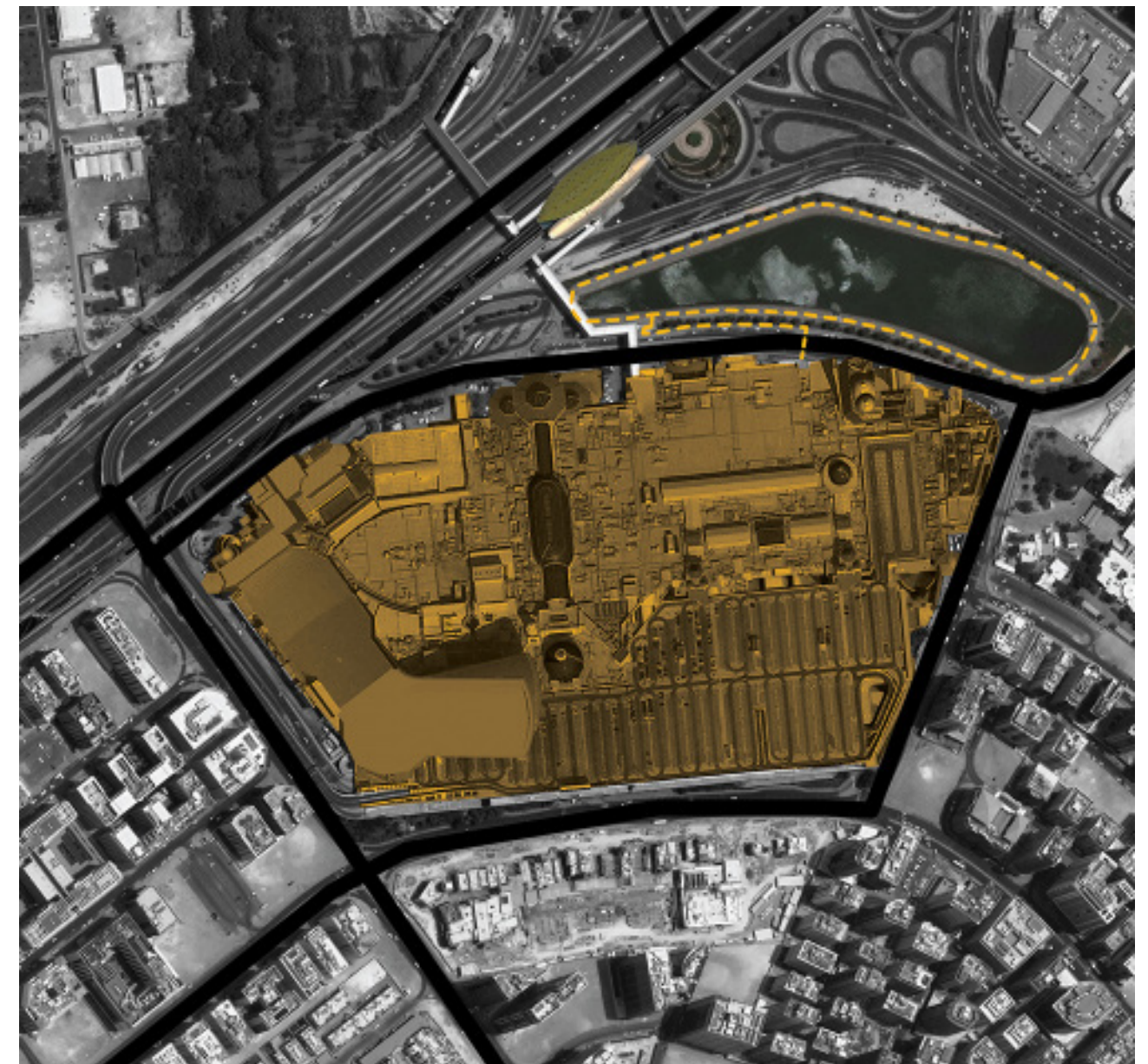
#### 4. OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSION

##### 4.1 *Mall of the Emirates Park: regeneration and new functions*

The discussion on the future of the area behind the Mall of the Emirates (fig.7), while used as a purpose for a broader discussion on the future of urban de-

velopment and in particular open spaces in Dubai, led us to reflect on some key points necessary for the redevelopment of this and other urban spaces. First of all, any open space that we choose to make “public,” must be equipped in such a way as to keep together as much as possible the different categories of end-users: we can opt, for example to make them a kind of “family friendly domestic spaces,” with equipment characterized by a certain flexibility in use, which can thus fulfill this and other informal uses. In designing such spaces, both the climate and the geography of the place must be taken into account, resorting to elements that constitute “arid softscapes,” in ecological balance with the environment and enriching the city with ecosys-

tem services. Beyond the function that one would like to attribute, it is necessary to emphasize how in this case the use of water as a fundamental component for the regeneration of the park would be a winner, as it would represent an exception to the other open spaces present in the city. Moreover, by enriching the park with new functions dedicated to dining or leisure, it would have a twofold advantage: on the one hand, the creation of “anchors” would activate that process of “city walk,” which has already turned out to be very effective in other areas; on the other hand, it would put this area in a functional relationship with the city, overcoming the mere “decorative” role it plays to date and transforming it into a new hub of regeneration.



**Figure 7:** Localization of Mall of Emirates. Source: own elaboration from Google Maps source.



#### 4.2 The metaprojects explorations

*Understanding all these differences compared to Western cases* was fundamental to launch, as part of the Expo 2020 event, the metaproject explorations at the worktables. The explorations focused on two pilot areas, located close to two shopping centers, the Dubai World Trade Center and the Mall of Emirates. At present these spaces are almost completely devoid of functions, with the exception, in the case of the World Trade Center, for some dehors which, despite being equipped with shading systems, are mainly used in the evening and night hours, when the attenuation of the heat allows the stay outdoors. Looking back at the results of the work tables, some recurring ideas can be grasped, which can nourish a design vision for Dubai's public spaces. One of these ideas is linked to the use of temporary installations, aimed for example at "ordering flows, creating shaded spaces and outlining meeting places for citizens" (Palestini, Di Cinzio, Pellegrini, Minischetti, 2022, pp. 115-129), installations that also offer the opportunity to reconfigure spaces, redesigning and enriching them with new functions. Ephemeral installations can become devices for connecting indoor spaces with outdoor spaces, obtaining a continuum that, with the right climatic comfort conditions, can expand the potential of one and the other. A hypothesis that would considerably reduce the gap, now clear, between internal spaces of comfort versus external spaces of discomfort. A gradual transition would also be advantageous for the well-being of people, as it would avoid the sudden change in temperature between outside and inside (and viceversa), which today can reach, and sometimes exceed, 20 degrees. Another recurring idea concerns devices for improving external thermal comfort, which is sometimes realized with the use of passive systems, such as solar shading and plant materials (which however have limitations due to climatic conditions and water shortage), and sometimes with active systems, such as evaporative cooling devices, with or without nebulizers. In the experimentation of another roundtable the metadesign proposal concerned the "schematization of a cooling device consisting of fans that generate air movement thanks to the energy deriving from solar panels (shading + pv). This device, once installed on the ground, will be able to strengthen the air flow, capture solar energy, improve the thermal comfort of the open space, so as to allow easier conviviality of people and open towards a

different experiential dimension" (Lusi, 2022, pp. 91-102). Also the plantation, from the point of view of another group, could be a useful practice to enhance the comfort of the open space: "Plantations should also be introduced both outside and inside the shading volumes, in order to foster the reduction of CO2 production and the cultivation of local green species that are adequate for the UAE climate" (Abita, 2022, pp. 103-114). These solutions cannot be conceived simply as technological additions to the space, but must be an integral part of its design, as happens for the Miroir d'eau in the Place de la Bourse in Bordeaux: an installation designed by Atelier Corajoud consisting of a mirror of artificial water 3 cm high which periodically transforms into a gigantic urban air conditioner. Thanks to 900 nebulisers, the water is vaporized, visually transforming the space with a fog effect which, in addition to being suggestive, is also cooling. Another idea that is worth exploring is that which looks to public spaces as family friendly spaces, introducing equipment characterized by a certain flexibility in use, which can perform uses such as those of catering or leisure. This strategy would make it possible to create elements of attraction capable of activating "city walk" processes, as already observed in other areas of the city; moreover, as we experienced in our roundtable discussion, "it would put this area in a different functional relationship with the city, overcoming the only decorative role it covers to date and transforming it into a new hub of regeneration" (Ciuffreda, 2022, pp. 57-68). But the problem with the open space in Dubai is not only that one of thermal discomfort, there is also a cultural problem and the real challenge is how "to create a livable and contemporary open space in observance of local cultural traditions now at risk of an increasingly predominant globalization" (Girasante, 2022, pp. 81-90). For this reasons another idea could be to re-think the public space as an urban machine, "In line with the inclination of Dubai as a futuristic and global city, always ready to go beyond the limit, in our imagination, the open space presents itself as a great machine, hybrid, performative, interactive and catalytic, capable of reconfiguring the modes of occupation, a space that is able to amaze and be a monument of contemporary Dubai" (Gruosso, 2022, pp. 69-80). Finally, the idea of informality, which in turn calls into question the ideas of improvisation and unpredictability, is an element that would give a voice to inhabitants with fewer rights, enabling connections and bonds

between communities, offering opportunities for participation and inclusion (Kyriazis, 2022, pp. 153-162). These ideas, although in contrast with the control objectives that characterize urban government, seem to put the social component back at the center, today present only in informal spaces, such as streets and spaces of minor importance. All these proposals require, to be implemented, a paradigm shift in the design and management of public spaces in Dubai, a change that must be affirmed by university teaching and supported in professional training, but above all it must invest

the decision making sphere and to this purpose events such as that of the Expo and, in a small way, of the Mediterranean Urban Design & Regeneration Campus can have their own importance. This research, and above all the network of universities that has been set up, want to help indicate a possible method, that of dialogue and confrontation open to all, without prejudices and without a priori convictions, around a project which in the relationship with places must each time assume a posture of empathic listening and emotional as well as intellectual understanding.

ATTRIBUTIONS

All the parts of this paper have been discussed and approved by all the authors.

However, the §§ 1, 2.1, 2.2 and 4.2 are by Massimo Angrilli; the §§ 2.3, 3.1, 3.2 and 4.1 are by Valentina Ciuffreda.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Massimo Angrilli, Valentina Ciuffreda (Unich) and Cristiano Luchetti (American University of Ras Al Khaimah and previously Heriot-Watt University, Dubai) took part in the working table whose outcomes are reported in this contribution.

<sup>2</sup> Reference is made to the excerpt "The City and Memory" from Calvino, I. (1972) *Le città invisibili*. Torino: Einaudi.

<sup>3</sup> Dubai 2040 Urban Master Plan<<https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/local-governments-strategies-and-plans/dubai-2040-urban-master-plan>>[Online: 5 April 2022].

<sup>4</sup> In the UAE, out of a total population of 10.7 million, 11.5 percent are from the local Arab community, while 88.5 percent are expatriates (2.6 million Indians, 1.2 million Pakistanis, 700,000 Bangladeshis, 525,000 Filipinos, 450,000 Iranians, 400,000 Egyptians, 300,000 Nepalese, 300,000 Sinhalese, 200,000 Chinese, others). Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation <<https://www.ice.it/it/mercati/emirati-arabi-uniti/informazionipaese#:~:text=Popolazione%3A%2010.7%20milioni%20di%20cui,%2C%20200.000%20cinesi%2C%20altri.>>[Online: 11 February 2022].

<sup>5</sup> Dubai Statistics Center. Report 2020 "Number of Population Estimated by Nationality- Emirate of Dubai". <[https://www.dsc.gov.ae/Report/DSC\\_SYB\\_2020\\_01\\_03.pdf](https://www.dsc.gov.ae/Report/DSC_SYB_2020_01_03.pdf)> [Online: 7 March 2022].

<sup>6</sup> This is the definition given by Cristiano Luchetti based on the American experience of POPs as outlined by Kayden Jerold in *Privately Owned Public Space: The New York City Experience*. John Wiley & Sons. 2000. In the essay "Dubai Walk-In City," Luchetti delves into its meaning. <<https://www.cristianoluchetti.com/dubai-walkin-city>> [Online: 5 April 2022].

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