



“Time as a Catalyst a Middle Eastern Perspective”

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It is often useful to reflect on the precise meaning of words. The Oxford Dictionary of English provides six definitions for the word “time”. Perhaps the best fit in our context is “the indefinite continued progress of existence and events in the past, present and future as regarded as a whole”. We also find a useful explanation of the word “catalyst” as “a substance that increases the rate of a chemical reaction without itself undergoing any permanent chemical change”.

So our topic is in essence about duration and chemistry! With a chemical reaction one would expect that there would be a direct relation between the amount of the catalyst and the intensity of the reaction or change; by increasing the catalyst you would therefore expect to produce a greater reaction. Applying this chemical analogy to society we can see that the larger the passage of time the greater the change that can be detected.

But what happens when the quantity of our catalyst “time” is reduced? Less change you might conclude. However this is not always the case. Some chemical reactions produce dramatic and startling changes in an instant. Volatile chemical reactions can be controlled and the energy put to good use, but others can have detrimental, even catastrophic outcomes.

Currently the Middle East is witnessing rapid urbanisation at previously unparalleled levels. Fuelled by high oil prices and increasing international demand, governments and developers are planning entire cities for immediate delivery. This is a volatile situation with ambitious plans, little time and an insatiable desire for progress. The level of change that is envisaged is certainly dramatic. But will the energy of this change be harnessed for the community benefit? Or will there be some unforeseen outcomes, for the community, the environment, and ultimately for the economies of these aspirational nations?



Recent developments in the UAE are drawing international attention. The wonders of the world are being recreated at Falcon City in Dubai Land, and Dubai is seen as the shining example of development and smart investment; the model for other cities in the region. Fifty storey towers are now envisaged on Reem Island adjacent to Abu Dhabi, a new city is planned for Um Al Qawain, a new 'Miama' is underway in Qatar and there are visions of creating 25 square kms of urban development on a 'blue' field site in Bahrain.

While this level of activity is dramatic and impressive, there is a volatility here that may threaten the success of these ambitious developments. The obvious concern is about sustainability. How will this change impact the natural environment? What will be the social consequences of such development? Will such investment provide a return for future generations?

To appreciate the dynamics of this chemistry it is useful to locate ourselves in space and time. The United Arab Emirates is a collection of seven Emirates, or states on the Southern Arabian Peninsula, with coastline facing both the Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The UAE is largely a desert. Historically this desert was only interrupted by isolated oases, such as at Al Ain and Liwa, and small settlements on the coastal perimeter. In recent times these settlements have grown into bustling cities aspiring to be noticed. Already Dubai is on the map with a night time glow that is visible from space.

The capital, Abu Dhabi is essentially contained on Abu Dhabi Island, a 25 square kilometre island separated from the mainland by a tidal channel. Traditionally the island was a seasonal camp for local Arab tribes who moved between the coast and the hinterland; forced by the intense summer heat to retreat to the shade and fresh water of the oases. While on the coast these people made a meagre living from the sea, pearling and fishing, and trading for other essentials.

As in most traditional cultures, these people lead simple lives, focussed on the immediate needs of food and shelter. The fishing village of Abu Dhabi, as it was 50 years ago, was comprised of an ad hoc collection of barasti huts, fashioned from palm fronds and separated from their neighbours by loose drifts of sand. They drank brackish ground water and led a tenuous existence without access to formal education or basic health care.

Today some of the hardy souls who made those seasonal journeys by camel are witnessing an extraordinary change. Their huts are gone, having been replaced by several generations of increasingly sophisticated structures. The boys, who clung to their parent's waists for fear of falling from their camels, are now travelling in style, in luxury sports cars, immaculately dressed in gutra and agal and starched dish dashes. The young girls who once wore scanty rags are now intriguingly secure within their head scarves and sparkling abayas.



The challenges of the hand to mouth existence of early life have been replaced by new challenges that threaten traditional values and customs. With the collapse of the pearling industry in the 1950s many local people moved away in search of opportunities elsewhere, and the population shrank to around 2000. Fifty years on, the population has grown to over 800,000, and the wealth that is flowing from the new oil and gas economies is clearly evident.

Fuelled by oil revenues and a voracious appetite for new investment and development opportunities, these economies are definitely in over drive. Elsewhere in the world where the process of urban development is more considered, there is time for assessment, evaluation and adjustment of development proposals. Legislation, planning codes, community development standards and design guidelines set the framework for this relatively orderly approach.

The current levels of development that we see in Abu Dhabi provide a sharp contrast with this familiar and more measured approach. The development controls that might be relied upon to temper the enthusiasm of investors and developers are not necessarily effective. Late night deals, often brokered over coffee in the Majlis, seal agreements that can override any development controls that may exist.

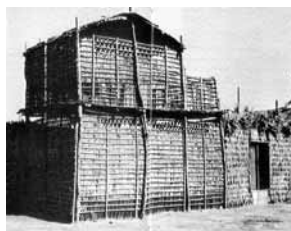
Awareness of the potential financial returns from quick property deals far outweighs awareness of environmental and social issues. Caution is not part of this chemistry. Ironically, 50 years ago time was of little consequence.

Whether the journey to Al Ain took 3 days or 4 was not really a concern. But now, in the rush to develop and capitalise on the opportunities, time is not just a catalyst, it is increasingly becoming a very scarce commodity.

The planned rapid urbanisation of the 'sand field' site that is Reem Island provides a stunning example. An urban community of 350,000 people is envisaged, living in what would be one of the densest settlements on earth. Over 400 people per hectare are expected to take up residence on this sandy island that currently sits no more than 4 metres above the high tide.

Developers are often young and enthusiastic and rarely have the inclination to research their development mix in great detail. There is little appreciation of the intrinsic value that community facilities, such as schools and health clinics, bring to the development mix. Similarly the importance of providing a network of public open space and associated recreation facilities, and the significance of the opportunities that these afford is rarely grasped.

We might expect that the cost of providing community facilities and recreation infrastructure might appropriately rest with government. But if the government is not collecting taxes, should the costs not be shared by the developers? The developers, having purchased their properties at prices, significantly inflated by the energy of the economy, are reluctant to come to the party. Both points of view are understandable, but neither represents a solution to this structural dilemma.



Economists, planners and property analysts agree that access to these community assets underpins property value and builds community wealth over time. Without access to such facilities communities are generally disadvantaged, and property values can be significantly eroded. This is a sophisticated and mature perspective; derived from evaluating and analysing property values and performance over time. Sadly this is not a point of view that can be appreciated immediately.

While this rapid urbanisation is the most dramatic expression of change in the Middle East it is not the only one of interest to planners and landscape architects. Urban renewal is also underway with significant refurbishment of existing urban areas occurring in most cities. Early planning was limited and the city form and fabric were largely driven by necessity rather than intention. There was little thought given to provision of open space, and the current trend toward densification is placing increasing pressure on the meagre open space assets that do exist.

Children play in foyers and corridors of residential towers, because they don't have access to alternatives. Recently opened play grounds on Abu Dhabi's Corniche have been overrun with children eager to play and explore the colourful structures. Long queues for slides and traffic jams inside tunnels are common. Play equipment has never seen such use; children emerge from tunnel slides three

high and others disappear inside, emerging much later, dishevelled and occasionally, distressed.

The 'score sheet' for the city streets is also a concern. High kerbs corral wayward drivers, buildings project from their plot boundaries, footpaths are fragmented by service roads and car parks, or are even blocked entirely by air-conditioners or other ancillary structures. The traffic however, moves freely and often at speed, with only the fool hardy and the most confident pedestrians chancing a crossing. Access to buildings is generally awkward and more often than not impossible for those with restricted mobility.

There is a growing appreciation of these issues and recognition that the current state of the public realm is unacceptable. The Higher Authorities are travelling and visiting other cities that present a different character, one that the Sheikhs find appealing and seductive. His Highness General Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi has declared his personal support for a new approach. His Highness has recently decreed that all new buildings will incorporate underground car parking. His Highness has also instructed that kerbs will be lowered and building levels set to provide access at grade.

Aside from the shabby sidewalks and the dominance of motor vehicles in the city streets, there is much to recommend Abu Dhabi to the



visitor. The ultra modern buildings that adorn the streets are a proud demonstration of the strength of the economy. There is also a subtlety here. Exotic fragrances and veiled faces entice and intrigue, but the personalities behind the fabrics and perfumes remain a mystery to the stranger.

This subtly contrasts with an overt expression of culture that is both exuberant and humorous. Coffee pots are everywhere, celebrating the well know hospitality of the Bedouin tribes. Urns and perfume bottles adorn medians and roundabouts, and cannons and bejewelled daggers remind the visitor that things were not always peaceful. Elaborate ornamental walls have replaced the Ruler's earlier utilitarian defences. Gates that traditionally provided privacy are now grand, intricate and transparent, providing glimpses of opulent interiors.

There is a growing appreciation that pedestrian friendly cities are popular with visitors, not just because they can move about more

comfortably, but because such cities are also generally more attractive. Tourism is now a potential driver for change; providing tangible support for the suggestion that the public realm requires a major overall. For those of us concerned with the visual character and quality of the public realm, this is indeed an encouraging sign.

It now appears that there is a genuine commitment to enhancement of the city through urban design initiatives. The dominance of the motor vehicle is at least being questioned and examined, and already new projects are responding to His Highness' instructions. However His Highness is impatient, and is looking for change quickly. There is significant pressure on all parties to move forward. While time, like a perfect catalyst, remains unchanged by the energy, and the chemistry of this situation, those of us who choose to live and work here are unable to claim such a privilege.

Shukran thank you very much °

