

# Dubai - City of Id

**It's hard not to be impressed by Dubai's Sheik Zayed road skyline and for many, the drive down it's glittery throat upon arrival, is a person's most vivid first encounter of Dubai. As I look at it now, the changes it has undergone in the four short years of my residence, are enough to make even the most die-hard pessimists relinquish their lemon sucking and tuck into the abundant heaps of sweet dates, because everything is possible. But at what cost?**

## **Tamsin Faragher**

South African landscape architect currently living and working in Dubai (UAE). Her special interest in environmental sustainability, urbanism and the impact of globalisation on design.  
tamsinfaragher@yahoo.com

One might be forgiven for thinking that as the city is expanding into the desert and ocean, the few pockets of 'old' Dubai would be safe and valued as integral to the city's established fabric. But this is not the case as areas such as Satwa come under threat from bulldozers rolling in to make space for Jumeirah Garden City - 'the most beautiful in the Emirate'. As a landscape architect, it is frustrating to see an area which has so much potential and personality, misunderstood, unappreciated and destroyed. At times it is perhaps prudent to review what makes a great city and be thoughtful about those criteria and consider carefully if demolishing neighbourhoods and destroying communities is the best way to achieve that objective.

### **The heart of Dubai**

On my first trip from the airport, I scanned the horizon and tried to make sense of the urban fabric, searching for an obvious hierarchy with a centre, which in my mind would be, 'the place to be'. My eyes quickly locked onto the Towers of Sheik Zayed road, but despite

their impressive stature, they weren't the city's walls and did not hold the city centre I was seeking. Nor did they fortify the squares, plazas, markets or civic buildings I had expected to find clustered within such magnificence. The glitz and glamour almost had me fooled, but it didn't take long for me to wonder where the heart, or at least the centre of Dubai truly lay, if not between the towers on Sheik Zayed road. I have been luckier than most, for not only did I find it, but it is where our offices are located, appropriately one might say, on Plant Street, right within the city's muscular centre - Satwa. This statement may be ridiculed and my criteria called into question, but indulge me a little further. Buckle up. Choose a channel on the radio and take a ride with me into the grimy streets of my favourite 'hood'. Optimistically, it might be said that Satwa is not only the heart of Dubai, but of the world, for within this popular and affordable neighbourhood, nationalities touching all latitudes and longitudes reside within the tightly packed geometry of streets and buildings, with local families, tetras-

**Sheik Zayed Road lined with hotels and apartment buildings**



slotted in with everyone else, a far cry from expat patches and gated communities. It's not a fancy place, but it feels homey and in no time at all, like everyone else, I was using the foul garbage fumes from the tips lurking on the backside of Lal's supermarket for my daily wake-up tonic and the sand pit (now home to six villas) across the road, to hone my off-road driving skills. In the mornings the streets are flowered with brightly coloured umbrellas toted by sashaying Filipinas, dangerously wandering in the middle of the road and crazy kids on bikes, dishdasha flapping wildly in the wind as they duck through narrow openings, sliced between wall-nourished palm trees and cranky old buildings. And in the evenings, as I head home from work, the low-rise buildings' long shadows strike cool canopies for the shisha-smoking grandpas who sit cross-legged on threadbare carpets, twiggly knees up and heads turned to verbally lasso rowdy kids in as they duck precariously close to tyres in hot pursuit of soccer balls. If one stops long enough at the stop street (that only I stop at) and you're lucky, you might be treated to the curling, wispy smells of someone's spicy supper. Or if your eyes manage to crank around the 4x4s' backsides loitering on the narrow pavements, you might be able to borrow a glimpse of a family seated within a courtyard, sharing their evening meal. But to truly appreciate Satwa is to leave it's tight matrix and experience the antithesis. It is to drive on roads where pedestrians are whittled down to insignificant scatter by over-scaled streetscapes as they asphalt-surge, vehicle-laden into 'projects' and 'Tower developments' to 'that point' where landscaping becomes a reflection of the sub-surface services and ever changing regulatory requirements, rather than a rich, quirky evolutionary process, cultured over time. Satwa exemplifies the historical, cultural space-making of low rise courtyard buildings and narrow streets, elements adopted in only a few



Aerial view of Satwa with Sheikh Zayed in the background

new Dubai developments with others reflecting more financial aspirations in their multi-storey structures. It is puzzling that a community which espouses culture, family and history as critically important can cheerfully give them the big heave ho! without a sniff of recognition at the obvious irony.

#### Neighbourhood demolition

The plans for the Jumeirah Green City are being developed and are widely mis-understood, thanks to a lack of transparency in the design process, and the information which is available, is passed in hissed Chinese whispers and randomly tacked together in a patchwork of titbits. If it weren't for the green graffiti numbers splashed on doorways, with their unavoidable and wryly amusing Biblical resonances, or the tangible almost daily disappearance of buildings, it would be hard to believe that what appear to be perfectly sound structures, are being demolished. It is

roughly estimated that 100 000 people will be forced to relocate, probably far from the city centre to the closest affordable accommodation from where it will cost them dearly in time and money to access work and amenities. As a result, families are splitting up and residents are leaving as it proves uneconomically viable to stay. Some public opinion would naively have us believe that this is the first neighbourhood to be demolished in history. But more accurately, this may be the first example of urban vandalism where there has not been any public outcry and activism. It is as if nobody cares. Most probably they do care but are part of the large illegal immigrant population living six to a room and would rather shadow-slide out than draw attention to themselves. The local families living in Satwa will receive compensation and housing and are therefore unlikely to object. The western expats, who generally do care, are



Aerial view of Satwa

possibly afraid to speak up, lest they receive the rapid-fire retort heard often at the faintest hint of criticism, to leave if you don't like it. Without delving too far back in history, precedent can be found for neighbourhood demolition and it is in South Africa where during the dark apartheid days, homes and communities were eradicated in the name of politics. This devastation is still present in the visual scars it has left on many of South Africa's cities' fabrics, such as District Six (Cape Town), but also in the deeper and more troubling social breakdown which unfolds with every generation forced out of the city and onto the frayed fringe, a side-effect Dubai will hopefully not suffer. Conversely, in other parts of the world bulldozers and single-minded city planning may be seen

to have contributed positively to what are regarded as some of the most enchanting cities in the world. Napoleon, for one, used Paris to express his vision of Empire, and remodeled the city's framework with the help of his henchman, Baron Haussmann. Together they carved into the dense Parisian matrix and created what are thought of today as textbook perfect streets, such as the Champs-Élysées. Does our generation berate him for destroying buildings and uprooting communities? Probably not. In Dubai, it is not politics or empire statements which are demolishing Satwa - so what is?

#### **Alienation**

The sad reality is that the changes made to Satwa are unlikely to be similar to those made by Baron Haussmann to

Paris' cityscape. A more likely scenario is that the proposed mixed high and low rise buildings will magically flutter down and arrange themselves in an anti-urban and self-referential way without reference to Satwa. It seems logical, judging from the projects in the pipeline, that although there will be low rise structures, towers will form a large part of the Jumeirah Garden City Masterplan. My heart can't help but sink at the thought of what the future holds for Satwa. It is not necessarily an aversion to towers, whose particular advantages are multiple, it is more the lack of scale and intimacy they impart on the public realm and the way they mimic those who fund and design them, morphing into manifestations of the Ego. The Id. The result are individual, veritable Towers of Babel, that become less successful within their contexts. Like people, towers are not distinct objects, they exist within an environment which is composed of systems and energy exchanges and if they are not integrated into these systems, they cannot function. This integration is primarily through public places and spaces which are difficult to attribute a value to because they do not yield an obvious profit and are consequently neglected in the overall design process. Inhabitants living in multi-storey complexes where public space and connections are not provided, will live their lives confined to the parameters of their apartments in a way that defies humanity and in spaces which contain life as though it were a contagious disease, air-locked and sterile. One can only wonder at the sense of pushing people even further apart from each other in a world already full of alienation and cultural misunderstandings. Without places to interact and express our humanity, developers are creating lonely people who exist within space, but do not participate for lack of appropriate places to do so. Satwa has a few parks, some more inviting than others, but it is the

animated streets which provide the entertainment and it is these streets we do not often see in large scale masterplanned developments. Public places in all their guises are critical, for this is where people interact, where grandpas pass the time of day, children play and people are allowed to exist together as members of this crazy human race of ours. It is here that we are able to slow down, walk, observe each other, catch facial expressions, casually overhear gossip and so on. Interaction is impossible between a person standing on the 10th floor of a building and someone perched looking down from the 20th. Is the person smiling and making an invitation to interact thereby initiating social intercourse? Or frowning? How is it possible to tell without binoculars?

If towers are rooted within a logical city network and a community, the potential power which they possess is limitless, as can be seen in the Daniel Libeskind's Freedom Tower. The structure's very stature is pegged to symbols of freedom and liberty - 1776 feet high - the same

number as the year the United States declared their independence. It has riveted the interest of all New Yorkers whose hearts and minds were captivated with the process of its design and whose participation and encouragement helped form the design development. This process of public participation gave the public a sense of ownership and the tower, though as yet incomplete, already seems to embody the dreams, aspirations and essence of the people who live and love there. How many towers and urban developments within Dubai can claim the same love and affection that the Freedom Tower has wrapped snugly around it? Our towers, some of them designed by the same architects, are twinkly and magical and open childrens' imaginary trapdoors up to platforms, from where they are able to take big, crisp, crunchy bites of blue sky and stroke the sun's fluffy halo. But is that enough? Do any of them symbolise anything meaningful and are they rooted into the city's emotional frequencies? Sadly, none to my knowledge.

With so much available space for new

development, why is it necessary to raze to the ground an established neighbourhood with real 'city' credentials? It's not only the design, social and economic implications which are cause for concern, but in a world carefully watching its resources and focusing on reducing, re-using and recycling resources, keywords to sustainable design and energy conservation, how can the Jumeirah Garden City development expect to garner anything but international ridicule, when in order to build it, a functioning neighbourhood was completely demolished? Satwa is an area which, if celebrated and restored, could give strong support to Dubai's efforts to become one of the greatest cities in the world and provide a sensible model for other developments. Its demolition is a missed opportunity by a city so full of possibility, or maybe we'll be pleasantly surprised when at the end of the year the plans are finalized and a sensitive, humanly scaled development and truly, the 'most beautiful in the Emirate' is unveiled to wow the world... or maybe I've just been eating too many dates.



Satwa Mosque

