

PLACEMAKING IN DUBAI

How successful are Dubai’s waterfront developments in creating quality places?

Introduction

Placemaking is a widely adopted tool used by local governments and tourism authorities to market destinations. Dubai has implemented this approach across the city and along its ever-growing waterfront. Today, most of the waterfront development across Dubai is managed by Meraas, a company founded by a member of the ruling family. As such, the creation of these waterfront places is top-down and not community-led, which raises the question: are the places they create quality places?

Research Objectives

1. Define ‘quality places’.
2. Develop an analytical framework.
3. Assess the waterfront developments.
4. Identify viewpoints on waterfront developments and placemaking in Dubai.

Methods



Visual analysis of three waterfront developments in Dubai. This involved the analysis of photographs.



Interviews with three professionals. They had interests either in place branding, landscape design or real estate.

Establishing the Framework

Quality places are high-quality environments that provide a variety of uses and activities for a variety of people. The criteria, to the right, were picked out from UK-oriented documents, however, they are applicable to almost all places. The waterfront and context of Dubai were considered during the creation of the framework, resulting in criteria such as heritage, culture, climate and wider surroundings (which includes the water).



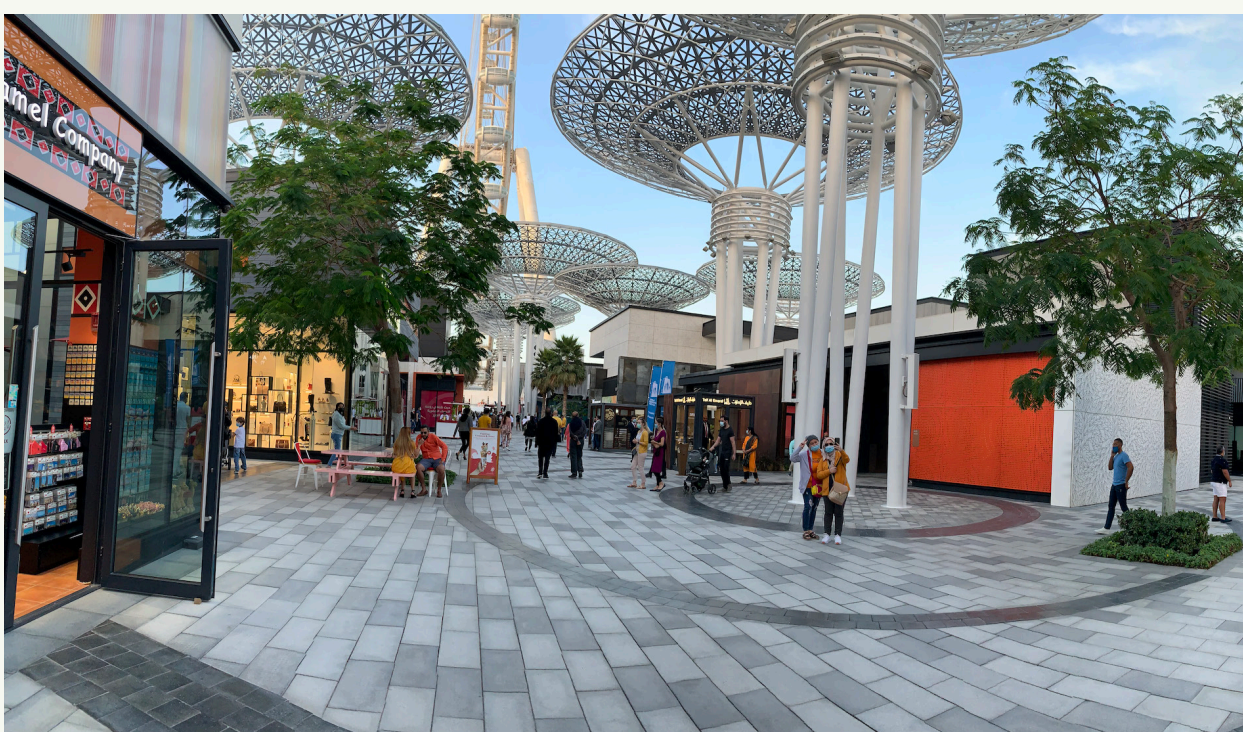
Figure 1 - Analytical framework (author, 2021).

Visual Analysis

All images are author (2021).



AL SEEF's narrative explores the city’s past and present, spanning from the historic-led design of the heritage area to the contemporary promenade which reflects the design of modern Dubai.



BLUEWATERS' location on a man-made island provides panoramic views across the sea and towards the city. The buildings and public realm are modern in design, and the focal point of the development is Ain Dubai, the tallest observation wheel in the world.



LA MER's approach to design takes inspiration from mid-century American cities and items that wash up ashore¹. The beachfront development creates a relaxed environment for visitors and residents to explore.

Interviews

[La Mer] “was prettily done, but there was no strong connection to Dubai in any way or form.”

There is little reflection of the heritage and culture of Dubai throughout the development, with abras (traditional boats) placed as props throughout the site.

“very sanitised, very Disneyland[-like].”

The developments appear clean and well-maintained which creates a pleasant environment for visitors. However, these “perfect” places lack vibrancy and resemble contrived, theme park-like destinations.

“To be perfectly honest, our design for these spaces is catered more for people using the [place] in the afternoon and the evening.”

However, literature suggests that providing uses and activities across the day and throughout the year is a key feature defining a quality place².

¹Limah (2019) *La Mer*. Available at: <https://www.limahdesign.com/case-studies/la-mer-public-art/#projectintro> (Accessed: 22 February 2021). ²PPS (2009) *10 Qualities of a Great Waterfront Destination*. Available at: <https://www.pps.org/article/10-qualities-of-a-great-waterfront> (Accessed: 13 March 2021)

