

Al Shindagha – Site's Story

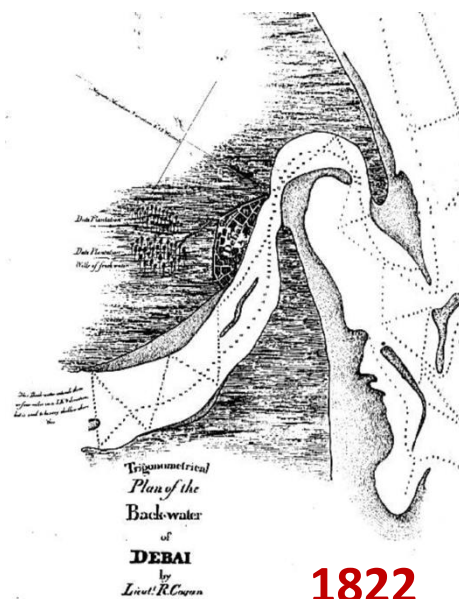
As I sit in front of my laptop typing this last essay, it is sad to know that our journey is coming to an end. A journey that started as far back as 1822. Through highs and lows, from the outbreak of small pox to the discovery of oil. I have gained more knowledge from studying this small piece of land than I have with any other case study previously; it did not zone in and restrict me to information just on the specific site, but rather opened a whole new world of events that resulted in periods of change. It took me on a journey through anthropology, sociology, theology, history, architecture, urbanism, and so many more areas that have truly enriched me – I will forever be indebted to the great al Shindagha.

It was a random Tuesday morning in Dubai, the kids were swimming and screaming by the pool, and the sun was unapologetically blazing down with rage. It was the week after I had finished my summer internship, and a week before school resumed for the fall semester. I was full of energy and passion and could not wait to resume and start learning about urbanity, Islamic architecture and implementing the knowledge in my studio project. I decided to start doing my own research so that I was ahead, and of course the most sensible place to research about was Dubai, since most of my projects are based here. After reading about 4 articles and a couple of websites I was disappointed and about to give up, I was about to call the driver to head over to Kinokuniya in Dubai Mall, then I came across an article titled 'Modernity and tradition in Dubai architecture by Luiza Karim' on the 'alshindagha.com' website. It was perfect. Everything I wanted to know, and broad enough so that it pointed me in the right directions for some deeper research. For example, it gave me names of architects like Hassan Fathi and Rashad M. Bukhash; and architectonic types like the barjeel, daen, and areesh. This was the beginning of a journey that would last 14 weeks, and knowledge gained that will benefit me forever.



Two weeks later, after my first lecture of Planning and Urban Design, I decided to visit the 'famous' al Shindagha that I had been reading about to see if it was worth choosing as my designated site. We drove from Jumeirah Village Triangle so we approached the site from Al Mina/Al Khaleej road; driving down this road I could already tell there was something special about this site – there was a lot of industrial construction going on and there was an active port/harbor, all on the left looking towards the Arabian Gulf. On the right there were a mixture of buildings that seemed to get more traditional the closer you got to the site (mostly low to mid-rise), and then there was a large Carrefour façade, before seeing the 'Historical Shindagha' signboard next to a carpark that was full. We parked the car, got out and began to walk towards the (seemingly) very old buildings. Our journey had begun; we were only there for about 10 minutes before I made up my mind that al Shindagha was the perfect sight to study.

Fast-forward to today, it's Monday and this paper is due in 6 days, my aim is to recollect the journey and knowledge gained through this research and the course at large. It is impossible to do that in just one essay, but I will try to retrospectively highlight the most important aspects that I would hope a future me could read and reminisce on, and also anyone can read, be interested and learn from. Because as Aristotle said "Those who know, do. Those who understand, teach." I will tell a story – a story of a site with all 5 senses as well as feelings, a site that has experienced 2 centuries of human intervention, and it is finally ready to talk.



1822

The story of this humble site (which I will refer to as 'Shin') begins in 1822 when he posed for his first self portrait. The artist was a man that came from a far away land, he was so impressed by Shin and his brothers that he decided to sketch and write about them; this man was British Lieutenant Cogan. Shin recalls how ecstatic the Lieutenant was, traveling all around them and capturing them from all angles, but only describing them as Bur Dubai and Deira, which were divided by a creek. This description upset Shin because it neglected his existence, it made him feel insignificant and unimportant, only because his brothers were bigger and older. This ignited a fire in him that would later result in him establishing himself as the most notable and most dignified. When the Lieutenant was here, Shin was very young, even his brothers (Bur Dubai and Deira) were relatively young, they only had about 1200

people between them. But they were unified nonetheless, so much so that they lived within a single wall; which was about 2.5 meters high and 60 centimeters thick, it was made from coral stone and gypsum and also had 3 watch towers. They were all happy when the Lieutenant left, not because they did not like him, but because they hoped he would go and spread a good word about them so that they would make more friends, acquire wealth and build more infrastructure, which actually did happen later on. But before this would happen, there were a series of events that transpired, both good and bad; Shin recalls these events, almost breaking into tears. The first occurrence was the smallpox disease that caught him and his brother Bur Dubai, it further split the family and most people left them and went to their other brother Deira. They were abandoned and deserted, it left them depressed for decades, with no friends, no money, and no work. Deira became more popular than them, bigger than them, and stronger than them. Thus, 1841 is a year Shin and his brother Bur Dubai will never forget.

Many decades later, the two brothers were back on their feet and karma chose to pay their brother a visit. In 1894, their brother Deira caught on fire, which burnt most of him. Shin soon came to realize though that this might have been a blessing in disguise for Deira because it brought him some new construction methodologies and materials. The wealthier people rebuilt their houses from materials like coral stone and gypsum, which are more fire resistant, meaning everything about Deira was now more modern than Shin and Bur Dubai. That further fueled the vengeance in Shin; the desire to succeed more than his brothers, given the tools he had at his disposal. It only took him 2 years to find a way to do this, by displaying his strengths to the right people, in 1896 he was chosen as the eligible candidate to accommodate the ruling Maktoum family. They saw him as the perfect choice; between his 2 brothers Bur Dubai and Deira, and overlooking the Arabian Gulf. This was the moment that Shin always dreamt of, the opportunity that would propel him ahead of his brothers and help him emerge from their shadows. He recalls the design decisions that the architects made, which are still visible today, and helps us understand the sociological and psychological climate of Shin in the late 1800s. The residence emulated simplicity through its modest façade and materiality of its envelope, yet it embodied wealth through sheer size, number of wings and variety of architectural styles. Shin compares it to the current Sheikh's palace in Zabeel, and although the element of privacy and culture can be felt, it has completely lost the sense of modesty, simplicity and connection with the people.



Twelve years after Shin rose to notoriety, another man described him and his brothers, this time including him in the description. The man was G.G Lorimer (one of the best historians and geographers of the Arabian Gulf) and in 1908 he said “There is no customs, the yearly revenue is \$51,400 mainly from pearls. In Deira side there are 1600 houses and 350 shops. In Shindagha area there are 250 houses. In (Bur) Dubai there are 200 houses and about 50 shops. There are about 4000 date palm trees in the town, 1650 camels, 45 horses, 380 donkeys, 430 cattle and 960 goats. In the creek, there are 155 boats for diving and trading and 20 small boats (abras) to take passengers between the two banks of the creek”. Although his brother, Deira, is still much bigger, Shin was the most elite and was in the best location. He was happy remembering this time as he proudly recollects the mentioning of his name as a part of history. This happiness became elation, because just 2 years later, in 1910 the ‘British Invasion’ occurred, along with this was the strategic placing of their HMS Hyacinth navy ship right next to him, further solidifying his status as the prime location. It is by no coincidence that we are talking about ‘the great’ Shin today – all these occurrences are influencing factors; in contemporary cities, these are the same type of factors that planners try to control. We have studied these topics in many lectures, but the one coming to mind now is ‘Planning and Politics’ when we studied the carrots and sticks. The mandates and inducements to state and local governments, there are certain zones and areas that are prime location, and there are others that the government gives incentive to potential developers in order to build the area and turn it into a prime location. It is interesting to see how the parameters of these factors become more and more controlled over time and shaped by people; what was once (fairly) organic growth is now controlled by those who influence the market.



Shin lived with Sheikh Saeed Al Maktoum from 1912 till the ruler’s death in 1958; he describes his time with the 20th century monarch in a kind of ‘romanticized’ manner, with a demeanor that says ‘I miss the good old days’. Shin says that the ruler lived among his people, his house was not isolated within hectares of land, rather it was embedded within the city amongst all the other houses. It followed the composition of traditional Dubai settlements of the sikkas, which are the narrow alleyways for shading and wind, and it did this through the close

proximity of houses next to it, only separated by this very narrow sikkas. Shin proclaims this as proof to show the climate of that generation and the openness and oneness they felt with their leader (although Dubai has that now more than most other regions in the world). He says times were mostly good with the ruler, until 1930 when the economy was affected by the great depression, world war 2 and the production of cultured pearls in Japan. Although this had a short term negative effect on Shin and his brothers, it would later result in his martyrdom and the exponential expansion and enriching of his lineage. In less than 15 years Shin and his brothers lost half of their people and by 1953 only had 20,000 people due to starvation and mass migration.

After the Sheikh's death, Shin was no longer accommodating the ruling family, but this did not matter he was already set in stone as a definer of Dubai's past and history. This was important because the chain of events that happened shortly after completely changed the genetic makeup of his brothers. In 1956 the first ever concrete building was constructed, and because this was cheaper than gypsum, he saw this material take over new buildings all around him. To attract people, the ruler lowered the tax brackets, which diverted people from Bandar Lengeh and Sharjah (main trading hubs at the time) to Dubai. This played a very major role because it attracted the Persians who were just across the Arabian Gulf, they settled in an area close to Shin called Bastakiya (named after the Bastak region they came from). The significance of this, among many others, is the barjeel (windtower) that they introduced. Now a main feature of most 'traditional' buildings in Dubai, it was actually borrowed from the Persians when they came to settle in Bastakiya. The creek was also dredged in order to allow more dhow ships to pass to accommodate the large influx of Persians and other people, physically impacted the form and fabric of Shin.



Then in 1969 oil production began and in just 10 years the population surged over 340% to 206,000 and this rapid influx of people created demand for expansion and mass construction. This in turn resulted in even more people leaving Shin, because with all the 'new' buildings, the development of the port as an industrial area (high intensity zone), and the central business district moving further away from him, people no more considered him prime location. But luckily, in 1990s restoration and renovation began on Sheikh Saeed Al Maktoum's house and in 1997 Shindagha was declared a Heritage Village and proper conservation work began. Shin has experienced a complete redevelopment over the past 20 years to emulate the 19th and 20th century Dubai. Today Shin says all he does is host a bunch of tours on a daily basis for tourists and local visitors and he is bored, he lives vicariously through his distant acquaintances; like Jebel Faya who found out she had stone tools from 127,000 years ago from African people, or Jebel Barakah who found tools for butchering animals from 130,000 years ago. He wants to be active again, he wants to experience action again, he has seen so much and been through so much and does not want to waste away doing nothing but hosting tours for people who don't really care about him. Shin wants to be useful in some other way, even if it is to "host my people again, make them feel at home" as he puts it. He says that unfortunately his brother and their new extended family have pushed their people away to far away relatives like al Barsha and Rashidiya and he wants to be useful and house them and make them feel at home once again like the Victorian homes in the UK or the classical homes in France.

**Creek elevation
Before restoration**



As I take the final bite of this delicious orange, that I spent 14 weeks peeling, I have to savor the taste. Shin has been a most welcoming host and I have never felt more embraced as a guest anywhere else I have journeyed to. All I hope to do now is repay him through further research on urban planning, urban design, and how these policies and designs can impact existing structures of a city. I hope to find a way to fuse and synthesize new, contemporary, and neo futuristic designs, with preceding artefacts in a way that is more enthusiastic than

merely a juxtaposition or superimposition; an amalgamation that will breathe new life into Shin and give him the excitement he felt in the 1920s. This might take some sort of surgery, by giving him the transformative capacities to adapt to new conditions autonomously, but still keeping the visual and typological integrity of 'antiquity'. Shin embodies Dubai architecture at it's best – the good, the bad, the ugly; the rich, the poor, the royal; the traditional, the indigenous, the imported; the past, the present, the future. And it is testament to a bright future, the fact that a neo-futuristic/avant-garde mind like myself can converse with fortified antiquity like Shin. The most important thing I have learnt from my conversation with him is that the old wants to adapt, but not disappear.

Creek elevation After restoration



So until we meet again, Shin, I bid you farewell. And once again extend my gratitude for your hospitality!