

Placemaking

exploration, research and reflection on cities , public space, urban design , urban planning and landscape design

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Housing developments in the U.A.E ; a place maker perspective

Sustainability is based on a triangulated relationship between three dimensions- economic, social and environmental.



The development community is moving slowly towards integrating the principles of environmental sustainability; Dubai has witnessed the increase of platinum LEED rated buildings and an increasing awareness of the importance of sustainability on a community level. Social sustainability is still lagging behind ; affordability of housing choices within Dubai is a main concern with the current rental hikes expected at 30% in 2014 .

Dubai Development industry is complex because the migration flows feeding its population growth is born out of the job market numbers. Currently , 277,000 jobs are expected to be created from 2013 -2021 with the spike expected during the preparation and operation of Dubai expo 2020. In a recent statement to Zawya.com, Deepak Jain, head of Strategic Consulting, MENA at Jones Lang LaSalle, states that whilst the current and the mid-term focus is more on mid- to high-end residential projects, the market fundamentals will result in developers launching affordable housing projects in the long term. Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council had taken a bold step in July 2010 when it announced that at least 20% of new residential property in the UAE capital needs to be set aside for affordable housing, with rents for a studio to start from AED 25,200 per annum. The new rule was applicable to all developments larger than 75,000 square meters, but the regulations have not been implemented yet. The Jobs, created mostly by the construction sector, means that the demand will be around for 200,000 units.



Affordability in Dubai is always a compromise between the amount of savings that could be sent to the home country and the intended lifestyle that the migrant would like to invest in. Therefore, I would tackle housing from the second aspect. How we encourage middle income employers to invest in buying affordable housing units in Dubai instead of renting? I believe the answers lie in the lifestyle of the environment he will be living in which is usually an output of the interaction between the urban design firm, the architecture team and the developer team.

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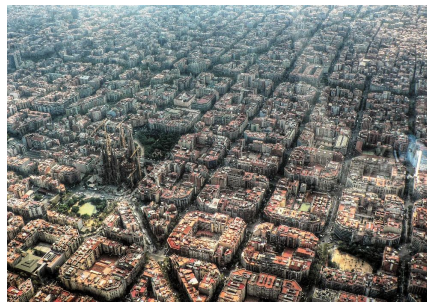
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The first master planned development in Dubai intended for affordable housing was The Gardens next to Ibn Battuta mall . The Gardens is a community built in 2000 to provide affordable housing for the employees of Dubai expanding TECOM free zone. The Community was based on typical horizontal low rise buildings in an expansive open space network providing parks, children parks, sports facilities, malls to the residents. Subsequently, schools, hospitals were added. The affordability of the Gardens was due to the low cost of land, low cost of infrastructure developments(in 2000 of course).From a design perspective, the layout of the buildings , the organisation of the flats, the elevation materials produced a sustainable typology. From a sustainability perspective, its typology enabled companies to rent out complete buildings in order to provide housing for their employers. The clustering of building into a complex of three/buildings gave it a sense of community as children from the same complex tend to play in the spaces nearby. The layout of streets between main arterial , meandering collector and cul de sac local roads made it legible as roads hierarchy corresponded to the spatial configuration of urban spaces. The most positive aspect of the gardens is its extensive cycling and pedestrian network connecting the expansive development; the main cycling path spans kilometres without interruption of vehicular circulation. The sense of community is further strengthened through the existence of two major parks that connects the different residential neighborhood.



From an urban scale, Affordability is linked to Density .However, density here means the intensity of occupants per square foot and therefore it is about the urban block rather than plot level. Barcelona has achieved higher densities through the densification of the urban block rather than the densification of the plot itself. The urban block is completely built around a courtyard giving the possibility of double decking the circulation corridors .The densification of the urban block did not prevent Barcelona from heavily investing in public and open spaces that contributes to the social life of its residents. Densification of the urban block needs to be coupled with the provision of recreational facilities, parks, gardens and activation of the street level spaces through retails, libraries and medical uses in order to maintain the safety of the development. Motor City Fox hills apartments are a clear example on how street level activity can be coupled with high densities.



Coming from that dimension, Urban policies need to focus on the elements that would promote intensification of density through monitoring the number of units per hectare as an additional measure of the development in the urban block and link communal facilities such as sports, retail and open spaces with the population densities .This measure gives a space for the developers and the designers to experiment with new typologies that would give them the densities required. We have experimented with this urban measure while I was part of the master development team in Dubailand, the regional framework plan in Dubai . Linking land pricing, community facilities provision, population densities and units densities has provided a win win situation for both public and private sector.From the current real estate market trends, we have succeeded in bringing dense developments with new typologies that are closing the gaps in affordable housing while maintain the wellbeing of their residents in perspective.



Other measures tested in other markets include up-zoning on commercial development corridors on the basis of provision of affordable housing that could be potentially served in the future by public transportation lines and reliable bus routing system; the up-zoning can be coupled with public private partnerships for roads and infrastructure construction.

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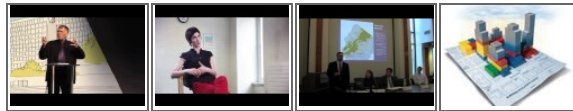
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