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Between Containers and Warehouses: Rehabilitating Port Proximities in UAE Coastal Cities

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Abstract

Len Chapman's early photographs of Port Rashid serve as an entry point into the narrative of port construction and its profound impact on global commerce and urban landscapes. These images, capturing the nascent stages of development, bear witness to the monumental transformations spurred by the construction of new ports and the modernization of historical ones in the UAE. The rapid economic and urban growth in the UAE, exemplified by projects like Port Rashid, reflects broader shifts in Gulf port geopolitics and global trade dynamics. The emergence of megaports and the era of containerization have reshaped maritime infrastructure and trade routes. This gave rise to unintended consequences, such as the disruption of coastal urban fabrics and the emergence of residual unsolved spaces. Recent recovery and rehabilitation processes like "districtification," museumification, and cultural reuse raise critical questions about long-term sustainability, public access preservation, and achieving a balance between passive and active engagement with port proximities. This article delves into specific case studies, including the Al Hamra ghost village, Al Shindagha, and MIZA Abu Dhabi to explore the impacts of maritime capitalism on urban and cultural landscapes. These sites reveal the challenges of balancing economic growth with sustainable urban recovery efforts, including "districtification," museumification, and cultural reuse. The analysis underscores the complexities of ensuring long-term sustainability, public access, and active engagement in port-adjacent areas. By adopting descriptive and comparative methodologies, this research aims to deepen the understanding of how maritime commerce shapes coastal urban areas in the UAE. The study contributes to discussions on sustainable urban development and heritage preservation, emphasizing the need for mindful urban planning in the Gulf's rapidly evolving and economically competitive landscape.

Keywords

coastal urban fabrics; cultural reuse; heritage preservation; port construction; maritime capitalism; museumification; port-city; port proximities; UAE; urban landscapes

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1. Introduction

The evolution of coastal cities in the UAE, particularly Dubai, offers a compelling case study of how globalization has reshaped the Gulf region's drive for commercial competitiveness. In response to intensifying global market demands, Gulf countries have strategically leveraged their coastal locations to position themselves as crucial nodes in international trade networks. Historically, ports have been central to urban development, serving as vital engines of economic growth and connectivity. In the UAE, the development of major ports such as Port Rashid and Jebel Ali was not merely a reaction to global economic pressures, but also a strategic endeavour to secure a competitive edge within the region.

Compared to traditional port-city models seen in Europe and Asia, the UAE's approach is distinctive. It is shaped by a blend of internal drivers, oil revenues, government-led initiatives, and rapid modernization. The velocity of these transformations became a critical factor in shaping new urban landscapes while reshaping and reverse-shaping port-proximity landscapes. Akhavan (2017) notes that this strategic integration of history and modernization is evident in Dubai's use of free trade zones and specialized economic zones, which not only support economic diversification but also symbolize the UAE's progress.

However, the UAE's drive toward economic modernization has been carefully balanced with the preservation of national identity and cultural heritage. The state has skillfully navigated the challenge of integrating modern infrastructure while maintaining continuity with its national narratives. Drawing on Bauman's (2000) concept of liquid modernity, the UAE has adopted a flexible approach to its historical legacy, selectively utilizing elements of its past to construct a cohesive national identity aligned with its ambitious economic objectives.

On the surface, the UAE's rapid port expansions and urban transformations appear fluid, reflecting an ability to adapt seamlessly to global trends. Yet, beneath this adaptive exterior lies a meticulously planned, state-led framework that ensures controlled development. This duality—a flexible outward image paired with a tightly controlled internal structure—enables the UAE to project an image of agility while maintaining oversight over its developmental trajectory. The strategic use of elements like museumification, "districtification," and performative urban planning demonstrates the UAE's sophisticated approach to shaping urban spaces and social interactions.

1.1. Methodology

This article employs a multi-faceted approach that includes a conceptual framework based on Bauman's (2000) liquid modernity, exploring the fluidity of urban spaces near major ports and how global commerce intersects with national identity. It features a literature review of key concepts like museumification and performativity, setting the theoretical backdrop for the redevelopment of heritage districts. The study also conducts a comparative case study analysis of five heritage districts, using visual documentation and descriptive methods to examine how these spaces balance preservation with active reuse, particularly concerning their proximity to ports. Additionally, a visual and descriptive analysis of photographs and other materials provides tangible evidence of the spatial and cultural transformations in these areas, offering insight into the physical and functional shifts occurring in these historical districts.

2. Theoretical Context

2.1. UAE's Port-City Model

UAE's port model and Dubai's model have evolved over four phases. Phase I (1900s–1950s): Dubai emerged as a free port, fostering early trade and settlement growth around Dubai Creek; Phase II (1960s–1970s): The discovery of oil and the establishment of modern urban planning (e.g., Port Rashid) positioned Dubai as an entrepôt city; Phase III (1980s–1990s): Dubai transitioned into a regional transhipment hub with infrastructure like Jebel Ali Port and free trade zones; Phase IV (2000s–present): Dubai evolved into a logistics hub integrating air, land, and sea transportation, with extensive free trade zones and mega projects such as Dubai World (Akhavan, 2017). However, it is crucial to recall the differences between the Western, Asian, and UAE port models. As highlighted by Akhavan (2017), who notes that Dubai's approach diverges from these paradigms.

The Western port-city model has evolved gradually over centuries, shaped by industrialization and urban growth. Ports and cities became spatially and economically distinct as industrial ports moved to accommodate larger-scale operations, leaving waterfronts for urban redevelopment. For instance, London transformed its former docks into the Canary Wharf financial district. Similarly, the Asian port-city model has been driven by globalization, industrialization, and colonial legacies, emphasizing the integration of port activities within urban and economic structures. This model's development stages range from colonial city ports to free-trade hubs and global logistics centres, maintaining an interdependent relationship between cities and ports. Cities such as Singapore, which transitioned from a colonial entrepôt to an integrated global logistics hub, and Hong Kong, where dense urban growth coexists with significant port activity, exemplify this integrated approach.

In contrast, the UAE's port-city model reflects a rapid, government-led transformation achieved within decades, fueled by oil revenues. This model focuses on integrating ports with urban development through strategic infrastructure investments and the establishment of free trade zones. Port operations, such as those at Jebel Ali Port, are combined with multi-use urban spaces like Dubai Maritime City. Unlike the gradual evolution of Western models, the UAE's approach prioritizes the speed of development and avoids the spatial and functional segregation typically seen in Western cities. Dubai's model merges port and urban development, maintaining the centrality of ports to the economy in a way that contrasts with the declining significance of ports in Western cities. This approach blends elements of Western urban redevelopment and Asian port-city integration while retaining its government-led transformation strategy. Features such as free trade zones, multi-modal logistics hubs, and global connectivity underscore its distinct approach to port-city development (Akhavan, 2017). The rapid pace of development and the absence of spatio-functional segregation have significantly impacted urban spaces near the ports, resulting in unresolved spatial dynamics. The following sections explore strategies used to address these challenges through the lenses of fluidity, performativity, and museumification.

2.2. Fluidity: Navigating Fluidity and Stability in the UAE

Bauman's (2000) concept of liquid modernity describes the increasing fluidity of social and spatial structures as globalization accelerates. In the UAE, fluidity is not merely a theoretical abstraction but a practical reality, as seen in the constant adaptation of urban spaces to the demands of global trade. Ports like Jebel Ali and Port

Rashid exemplify this fluidity, serving as ever-evolving hubs that integrate air, land, and sea transportation to maintain their relevance in a competitive global economy.

In the UAE however, fluidity is mediated by a state-directed model that prioritizes national cohesion and cultural preservation alongside economic modernization. Rather than allowing fluidity to dominate, the UAE implements a highly coordinated framework that channels global influences while maintaining a strong sense of local identity. For Emirati citizens, this framework provides stability by reinforcing cultural heritage and traditions, even in rapidly transforming urban areas. Conversely, for expatriates—who make up the majority of the UAE's population—fluidity is experienced through transient work arrangements and temporary living conditions, creating a cosmopolitan but impermanent social fabric (Kanna, 2011).

The UAE's approach to managing fluidity is both strategic and deliberate. Ports and their proximities become zones of cultural negotiation, where global commerce intersects with local heritage. This creates a dynamic interplay between fluidity and rootedness, as areas like Al Shindagha are redeveloped to reflect the UAE's cultural heritage while adapting to the functional demands of modern urban life (Damluji, 2006). The UAE's model, therefore, does not simply "balance" fluidity and stability but reconfigures them into a synergistic relationship, ensuring that national identity is not subsumed by global forces but enhanced through selective integration.

2.3. Districtification: Integrating Heritage and Urban Growth

Districtification in the UAE represents a deliberate strategy to transform urban spaces into multifunctional zones where heritage preservation and contemporary development coexist. This concept aligns closely with the UAE's vision of creating culturally significant spaces that remain economically and socially relevant. Unlike Western cities, where redevelopment often segregates historical zones from modern ones, the UAE integrates these elements into cohesive districts. In this way, districtification becomes a tool not just for urban planning but for nation-building.

The spatial implications of districtification are evident in projects like the Heart of Sharjah, where traditional Emirati architecture is preserved while new cultural and commercial facilities are introduced. These heritage districts are carefully curated to serve as living spaces that blend past and present, creating a sense of continuity even as urban growth accelerates. Socially, districtification transforms heritage sites into active public spaces that foster community engagement. By hosting events, exhibitions, and cultural activities, these districts become performative arenas where residents and visitors alike can connect with Emirati traditions (Boussaa et al., 2023).

In the UAE context, districtification is more than a spatial strategy; it is a state-directed effort to define and reinforce a cohesive national identity. This approach ensures that while global commerce reshapes the city's economic landscape, its cultural and social foundations remain intact.

2.4. Managing Fluidity in Ports and Urban Spaces

As the UAE integrates its ports into the global economy, the surrounding urban spaces have become critical arenas for negotiating cultural identity and modern development. The state employs strategies such as

museumification and districtification to shape these port-adjacent spaces, blending traditional Emirati heritage with the demands of global commerce (Boussaa et al., 2023). Al Shindagha in Dubai and the Heart of Sharjah are examples where these strategies are implemented to transform heritage sites into spaces that balance preservation and functionality. Through these interventions, the UAE showcases that modernity and cultural continuity are not inherently oppositional but can coexist in carefully curated urban environments.

The Heart of Sharjah project and the Al Shindagha Museum district illustrate how proximity to global trade infrastructure influences the spatial and social significance of heritage sites. These areas are not merely preserved as static artefacts but are reimagined to support the UAE's nation-building agenda. By incorporating museums, art spaces, and cultural projects into these historically significant areas, the UAE ensures that while the physical landscape evolves to accommodate trade, the cultural landscape remains firmly rooted in Emirati traditions. This approach recontextualizes heritage to fit within the UAE's modern narrative, reinforcing national identity amidst globalization.

The UAE's management of fluidity in these spaces is deliberate and multifaceted. While Bauman's (2000) concept of liquid modernity emphasizes the destabilizing effects of globalization on national identities, the UAE redefines this dynamic by implementing state-directed frameworks that mediate between global commerce and local heritage. Ports like Port Rashid and Jebel Ali exemplify this interplay, where urban development is regulated to ensure that these spaces remain economically vital while also culturally significant. By transforming port proximities into performative spaces that host events, exhibitions, and regeneration projects, the UAE aligns economic imperatives with cultural preservation. This proactive approach exemplifies how the UAE navigates the challenges of globalization by turning fluidity into an opportunity to reassert cultural identity.

2.5. Museumification and Performativity: Definitions and Applications

Museumification and performativity represent two key strategies through which the UAE engages with its heritage spaces. Museumification refers to the transformation of historical sites into curated spaces that emphasize preservation and education. This approach is exemplified by districts like Al Shindagha, where traditional Emirati architecture is meticulously conserved to reflect the nation's cultural legacy. However, unlike static museumification models seen elsewhere, the UAE integrates these sites into the urban fabric, ensuring they remain active contributors to social and cultural life. By hosting exhibitions, educational programs, and cultural events, these spaces are repositioned as dynamic cultural hubs that attract both local and international audiences (Damluji, 2006). This recontextualization ensures that heritage is not only preserved but also reinterpreted to align with contemporary narratives.

Performativity has emerged as a significant concept in urban architectural discourse, encompassing a wide semantic range that includes flexibility, dynamic spatial settings, event-based spaces, and active engagement with both space and context. A review of the literature highlights various interpretations of performativity.

At its core, performativity refers to the open and adaptable nature of space, which invites improvisation and change (Signore, 2015). It is also associated with the scenic and theatrical qualities of spaces that evoke specific moods or atmospheres (Janson, 2015). The concept captures the interplay between intentional and unintentional elements, the planned and the unplanned, emphasizing a space's readiness to evolve beyond its original intended use (Leatherbarrow, 2005).

Moreover, performativity suggests a project in progress, characterized by networked and non-linear mechanisms (McKenzie, 2002). It enables architecture to transcend disciplinary boundaries, incorporating tools from performance art (Lavin, 2012). Performative-oriented spatial design highlights a space's ability to perform multiple functions simultaneously and to convey meaning (Kassem, 2022).

The transformative nature of performative spaces lies in their capacity to restructure spatial and social orders by influencing both audience and context (Carlson, 2008). Brüeckner's (2008) concept of "making spaces talk" illustrates this idea, suggesting that performative spaces actively engage with users through design, choreography, and dramatization (Atelier Brückner, 2011). This dynamic is evident in UAE heritage sites like the Heart of Sharjah, where the interaction between architecture, cultural programming, and social participation creates a vibrant cultural ecosystem.

Performative spaces transform heritage into interactive environments that invite active participation. Sites such as the Heart of Sharjah and the Al Shindagha Museum district host a variety of activities, including public performances, art installations, and community gatherings. These spaces blur the line between historical and contemporary, allowing heritage to be experienced rather than merely observed. As von Hantelmann (2014) notes, performative spaces transform visitors into participants, positioning the heritage site as an active agent in cultural production.

In contrast to museumification, performativity reinvigorates historical spaces by encouraging adaptive reuse and continuous reinterpretation (Kassem et al., 2024). The UAE's application of these strategies is particularly significant in port-adjacent districts. Historical sites such as Al Jazeera Al Hamra in Ras Al Khaimah and the Old Heart of Sharjah, once neglected due to modernization, have been revitalized through a blend of museumification and performativity. These spaces now serve dual purposes: preserving cultural heritage while accommodating contemporary uses that foster community engagement. This holistic approach ensures that historical districts are not isolated relics but integral parts of the urban fabric, reflecting the UAE's commitment to bridging past and present.

3. UAE Port Cases: Rehabilitating Port Proximity Sites

In the following discussion, we examine the performative approach to the reuse of historical districts in the UAE. While museumification typically emphasizes preservation and a more conservative approach, performativity is dynamic and interactive, embracing both change and modernity. The approach selected for any given district depends on the cultural, economic, and educational objectives set by those managing the heritage. In some cases, districts blend both strategies, balancing the desire for historical preservation with the need for active community engagement.

Our analysis of the five case studies (the Old Heart of Sharjah, Al Shindagha in Dubai, MIZA in Abu Dhabi, Al Jazeera Al Hamra in Ras Al Khaimah, and Umm Al Quwain) focuses on key criteria that define the relationship between heritage and urban regeneration. These include the nature of public engagement (whether passive or active), the heritage presentation strategy (such as adaptive reuse or reconstruction), and the intensity of presence and occupancy (ranging from occasional to continuous use).

Additionally, the analysis explores the heritage processing approach (whether oriented towards museumification or performativity), the specific cultural objectives driving each project, and the functional uses of each space (whether monofunctional or multifunctional). It also considers the presence and accessibility of public spaces, the site's connectedness to the broader urban context, and the degree of spatial intervention (whether fixed or adaptable to future changes). Finally, the proximity of the site to new port developments and its impact on the site's role and opportunities are also assessed.

3.1. Case 1: Heart of Sharjah, Sharjah

3.1.1. Background and Historical Significance

The Heart of Sharjah stands out as one of the UAE's most significant urban regeneration projects, reflecting the Emirate's rich history as a centre of trade and cultural exchange. Historically, this district was integral to Sharjah's role as a prominent trading hub in the Arabian Gulf, benefiting from its strategic location on the Trucial Coast (Al-Sayegh, 1998). From the 19th century onwards, Sharjah thrived on pearl trading and maritime commerce, with its port facilitating connections with India, Persia, and East Africa. Over time, modernization and urbanization threatened its historical fabric, prompting conservation efforts to preserve and showcase the district's architectural and cultural heritage.

The Heart of Sharjah initiative aims to restore the historical essence of the area while incorporating modern amenities. The project emphasizes the preservation of traditional souks, mosques, and residences, all of which embody the architectural vernacular of the region. By doing so, it not only preserves Sharjah's cultural legacy but also positions the district as a dynamic space for contemporary use.

3.1.2. Key Architectural and Urban Planning Features

The conservation of the Heart of Sharjah is a case of radical conservation; the historical district was largely reconstructed following its earlier demolition and replacement with modern buildings. Despite appearing as a light intervention, the project represents a significant transformation aimed at reviving the vernacular architectural aesthetic. Narrow shaded streets, whitewashed façades, and intricately carved wooden doors were meticulously recreated to reflect Sharjah's architectural heritage while incorporating modern infrastructure for contemporary functionality, such as discreet air-conditioning and advanced lighting systems (Damluji, 2006).

The approach extends beyond mere reconstruction. Many of the newly restored buildings have been repurposed as art galleries, cultural venues, and educational spaces, seamlessly blending historical preservation with active modern use. The Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF) has been instrumental in this transformation, leveraging the district's recreated historical setting as a platform for artistic and cultural innovation. Through a diverse array of exhibitions, performances, and workshops, the SAF has reimagined the Heart of Sharjah as a dynamic and interactive cultural hub that bridges Sharjah's historical legacy with its contemporary aspirations.

3.1.3. Historical Overview and Relationship to the Port

Sharjah's historical district was deeply tied to its port, which once served as the economic and social nucleus of the Emirate. However, mid-20th-century modernization efforts, which saw much of the old town replaced by modern infrastructure, disrupted this symbiotic relationship, severing the district from its waterfront roots (Boussaa, 2023). The Heart of Sharjah project represents a bold attempt at radical conservation, reconstructing the historical framework that had been lost to modernization. This endeavour not only seeks to revive the district's vernacular urban aesthetic but also aims to reintegrate it into Sharjah's broader urban context, ensuring that heritage remains central to the Emirate's cultural identity.

The reconstruction effort, while ambitious, is not without its implications. By rebuilding large portions of the district, the project walks a fine line between authenticity and reinvention. While this approach preserves the spirit of Sharjah's past, it raises questions about the balance between historical accuracy and the practical need to make heritage sites functional in a contemporary context.

3.1.4. Performative Approach: The Role of the SAF

A distinctive element of the Heart of Sharjah project is its move beyond traditional preservation toward radical conservation with a performative dimension. This approach, spearheaded by the SAF, transforms the district into a cultural and artistic hub, reactivating its spaces for contemporary use. SAF programming—including artist residencies, public art projects, and educational workshops—imbues the district with vibrancy, ensuring that its reconstructed spaces serve as platforms for cultural and community engagement.

The interplay between reconstructed historical elements and dynamic cultural activities enhances the district's identity as a living museum. However, the performative approach also highlights the tensions inherent in balancing the reconstructed district's historical narrative with the demands of contemporary cultural programming, illustrating the delicate balance required in radical conservation efforts.

3.1.5. Challenges and Opportunities

While the Heart of Sharjah project has successfully reconstructed and revitalized the district, its reliance on radical conservation introduces unique challenges. Rebuilding parts of the historical framework from scratch, while visually compelling, raises critical questions about the authenticity of the heritage it seeks to preserve. This approach risks creating a "staged" version of history that may alienate local communities who remember the area's pre-modernization form. Reconciling these tensions will require a careful narrative framing that integrates the reconstructed elements into Sharjah's living cultural memory.

Furthermore, the episodic nature of the district's current activity highlights a need to sustain daily engagement beyond seasonal cultural programming. Radical conservation offers an opportunity to embed these spaces more deeply into the social and economic fabric of the city by introducing mixed-use functions, such as integrating residential units for local artists and residents, small-scale retail spaces that reflect the area's traditional trade practices, cafes and restaurants catering to both tourists and locals, co-working spaces for creative professionals, and studios for art and cultural production. These elements can foster a dynamic, year-round presence that balances tourism with local use.

Finally, radical conservation has significant implications for long-term urban sustainability. By ensuring that reconstructed spaces are adaptable to future needs without losing their historical essence, the project can evolve beyond static heritage preservation. This will require continuous community involvement and innovative urban planning to position the district as a model for balancing heritage and modernity in rapidly urbanizing contexts.

3.2. Case 2: Al Shindagha District, Dubai

3.2.1. Background and Location

Al Shindagha, one of Dubai's most historic neighbourhoods, occupies a prominent position along the bustling Dubai Creek. Historically, the district served as a residence for the ruling Al Maktoum family and was a vital hub for trade, governance, and social life in the city. Its strategic location along the creek cemented its importance as a maritime gateway, connecting Dubai to key trading networks in India, East Africa, and Persia. Over time, Al Shindagha evolved into a symbol of Dubai's cultural heritage, culminating in the establishment of the Al Shindagha Museum district. This district now houses cultural landmarks such as the story of the Creek Museum, Al Maktoum Museum, and the Perfume Museum, each underscoring Al Shindagha's integral role in Dubai's historical narrative.

3.2.2. Key Architectural and Urban Planning Features

Al Shindagha exemplifies a conservation effort that balances traditional architecture with modern needs, reflecting a nuanced approach to museumification. The district's restoration prioritized the use of authentic materials such as mud-brick façades and preserved architectural elements like wind towers (*Barjeel*) and courtyard layouts. However, discreet modern interventions—such as climate control and public infrastructure—were integrated to support its contemporary functionality as a cultural hub (Al Amiri, 2020).

Public spaces within Al Shindagha were redesigned to accommodate both passive and active cultural experiences, bridging heritage preservation with modern urban engagement. This thoughtful design facilitates the coexistence of static exhibitions with dynamic programming, creating a layered urban experience.

3.2.3. Historical Overview and Relationship to the Port

Dubai Creek was historically the lifeline of the city's economy, positioning Al Shindagha as an epicentre for trade and commerce. The district thrived as a maritime hub, facilitating the exchange of goods such as pearls, spices, and textiles. However, the construction of modern port infrastructure, including Port Rashid in the 1970s, marked a turning point in Dubai's maritime economy. The focus shifted from the creek to larger, more centralized shipping hubs, leading to the gradual transformation of Al Shindagha into a heritage district. While its role as a commercial hub diminished, the district's redevelopment aims to restore its significance within Dubai's urban fabric, now reframed as a cultural and historical focal point.

3.2.4. Performative Approach

Although Al Shindagha is predominantly characterized by museumification, performative elements have been incorporated into its cultural programming. The district regularly hosts temporary exhibitions, cultural festivals,

and educational workshops, utilizing its courtyards and public spaces as venues for interactive engagement. These activities enhance the visitor experience by integrating historical narratives with contemporary forms of cultural expression. However, the performative aspect remains secondary, with much of the district's life driven by tourism rather than sustained local engagement.

3.2.5. Challenges and Opportunities

The district faces the ongoing challenge of balancing cultural preservation with commercialization. Over-reliance on tourism-driven programming risks alienating local communities and creating a static cultural showcase rather than a living, dynamic heritage space. To address this, Al Shindagha must develop strategies to attract diverse audiences, including residents, through programming that integrates everyday activities with cultural preservation.

Incorporating mixed-use developments, such as creative workspaces and residential components, could further enhance the district's vibrancy. Strengthening the connection between Al Shindagha and Dubai's broader urban framework, particularly its proximity to Port Rashid, presents an opportunity to bridge the district's historical identity with its modern context.

3.3. Case 3: MIZA Project, Abu Dhabi

3.3.1. Background and Location

The MIZA project represents Abu Dhabi's ambitious attempt to transform the historical Mina Zayed port area into a vibrant cultural and creative hub. Established in the 1970s as Abu Dhabi's primary port, Mina Zayed was pivotal in the city's development, facilitating the import and export of goods during a period of rapid urbanization. However, the emergence of the larger Khalifa Port in 2012 rendered Mina Zayed underutilized, leaving much of its infrastructure abandoned. The MIZA project seeks to breathe new life into this industrial space by repurposing its warehouses into art studios, educational facilities, and event venues, positioning it as a cornerstone of Abu Dhabi's cultural economy.

3.3.2. Key Architectural and Urban Planning Features

The adaptive reuse of Mina Zayed's industrial architecture lies at the heart of the MIZA project. The initiative transforms shipping containers and warehouses into multifunctional spaces, showcasing a commitment to sustainability and innovation. The project retains much of the original street grid while incorporating pedestrian pathways and landscaped public spaces, creating a balance between historical character and modern urban accessibility (Al Amiri, 2020).

Key interventions include integrating green spaces and cultural venues into the area, fostering both social interaction and environmental sustainability. By blending industrial heritage with creative industry requirements, the project reflects Abu Dhabi's vision for a culturally enriched urban future.

3.3.3. Historical Overview and Relationship to the Port

Mina Zayed played a significant role in Abu Dhabi's emergence as a regional trading hub, handling a substantial portion of the UAE's container traffic during the 1970s and 1980s. With the relocation of port activities to Khalifa Port, the site's relevance waned, leaving an industrial void in the city's landscape. The MIZA project seeks to redefine Mina Zayed's legacy by preserving its industrial heritage while aligning it with Abu Dhabi's cultural ambitions.

3.3.4. Performative Approach

The MIZA project actively incorporates performative strategies through dynamic cultural programming. Temporary art installations, maker events, and creative workshops animate the repurposed warehouses, transforming them into sites of active engagement. This performative approach ensures that the project remains flexible and adaptive, accommodating both short-term events and long-term cultural initiatives.

3.3.5. Challenges and Opportunities

The MIZA project must navigate the challenge of maintaining cultural relevance while addressing logistical hurdles such as accessibility. Its location, though historically significant, is somewhat removed from Abu Dhabi's central cultural districts, necessitating sustained efforts in marketing and infrastructure development.

To ensure the project's long-term success, it must balance the creative community's needs with those of commercial stakeholders. Expanding the project's scope to include more mixed-use developments could enhance its integration into Abu Dhabi's urban fabric, fostering continuous engagement across diverse audiences.

3.4. Case 4: Al Jazeera Al Hamra, Ras Al Khaimah

3.4.1. Background and Location

Al Jazeera Al Hamra is a historic village located in the southern part of the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah. Once a bustling pearling town, the village thrived during the early 20th century, with its economy heavily reliant on the pearling industry and its proximity to the sea. However, by the mid-20th century, the village was abandoned as its residents relocated to modern urban centres, driven by economic shifts following the decline of the pearling industry and the rapid development of the UAE's oil-driven economy (Heard-Bey, 2004). Today, Al Jazeera Al Hamra stands as a ghost village, largely intact and offering a rare glimpse into traditional Emirati life and architecture before the oil boom. Its partial restoration has transformed it into a site of cultural and historical significance, attracting scholars, tourists, and cultural events.

3.4.2. Key Architectural and Urban Planning Features

The architectural features of Al Jazeera Al Hamra reflect the vernacular building techniques of early 20th-century coastal villages in the UAE. The village comprises coral-stone houses, traditional courtyards,

and defensive watchtowers—all emblematic of the era's architectural style. The preservation efforts have focused on stabilizing the structures and maintaining the integrity of the original materials, with minimal modern interventions (Al Amiri, 2020). The urban layout of narrow alleyways and open courtyards remains unchanged, offering insight into the historical urban planning of the village. This preservation strategy allows the site to serve as an educational tool for understanding the architecture and community life of pre-oil Emirati society.

3.4.3. Historical Overview and Relationship to the Port

Al Jazeera Al Hamra's historical relationship to the sea was integral to its development as a pearling town. The village's proximity to the port allowed residents to engage in maritime trade and pearl diving, activities that formed the backbone of the local economy. However, as Ras Al Khaimah's modern port infrastructure developed and the pearling industry collapsed in the mid-20th century, the village's economic relevance declined, and its residents moved to urban centres. Today, the area is largely abandoned, though part of it has been repurposed to house foreign workers. The section of the village that is slightly remote from the port and sea is undergoing renovation and reconstruction, with the restored portions already hosting cultural activities such as the RAK Fine Arts Festival, which highlights the site's evolving role in cultural preservation and artistic engagement.

3.4.4. Performative Approach

Al Jazeera Al Hamra offers a distinct form of performative engagement, one that is more passive and reflective compared to other heritage sites. The village is primarily experienced as a quiet, contemplative space, where visitors can explore its ruins and reflect on life in a pre-oil Emirati village. The performative elements are subtle, occasionally activated through cultural events and film productions that take place in the village. The RAK Fine Arts Festival is a notable example of how the site integrates contemporary art and heritage, offering a juxtaposition of modern artistic expression within the preserved traditional environment.

3.4.5. Challenges and Opportunities

The most pressing challenge for Al Jazeera Al Hamra is sustaining its identity as a "ghost village" while integrating it into contemporary cultural frameworks. Radical conservation of its vernacular architecture offers an opportunity to preserve its historical authenticity. However, efforts to enhance visitor engagement must remain sensitive to the site's contemplative nature. Developing a balance between passive reflection and more active programming, such as cultural festivals and interactive exhibits, could attract broader audiences without compromising the village's unique atmosphere.

Additionally, its isolated location presents both a challenge and an opportunity. While the village's remoteness reinforces its historical narrative, improving accessibility through enhanced infrastructure and curated visitor experiences could elevate its profile within the UAE's cultural tourism landscape.

3.5. Case 5: Umm Al Quwain Heritage District, Umm Al Quwain

3.5.1. Background and Location

The Umm Al Quwain Heritage district is located in one of the UAE's least developed emirates, offering a unique lens into the country's pre-modern way of life. Unlike the rapid urbanization experienced in other parts of the UAE, Umm Al Quwain has developed at a slower pace, allowing its heritage district to retain much of its original character. The district is a repository of traditional Emirati architecture, including wind towers, mud-brick houses, and defensive fortifications, which once served as the centre of governance and community life. Today, the area is undergoing restoration efforts to repurpose these structures for tourism and cultural engagement, offering visitors a contrast to the more modernized urban centres of the UAE.

3.5.2. Key Architectural and Urban Planning Features

The restoration of Umm Al Quwain Heritage district emphasizes preserving the aesthetic and architectural integrity of its historical structures while adapting them to modern uses. Traditional design elements, such as narrow alleys, open courtyards, and wind towers, have been carefully maintained to ensure authenticity (Al Amiri, 2020). These efforts reflect a commitment to preserving the urban fabric of the pre-modern settlement while introducing functionality through adaptive reuse.

Buildings within the district have been repurposed as museums, cultural centres, and exhibition spaces, fostering cultural and educational engagement. However, the district's urban planning remains relatively static, with limited integration of dynamic spaces for contemporary uses. This has resulted in an architectural landscape that prioritizes preservation over versatility, highlighting the need for future interventions to make the district more accessible and multifunctional.

3.5.3. Historical Overview and Relationship to the Port

Historically, the heritage district was closely linked to Umm Al Quwain's port, which facilitated the emirate's trade and commerce. The port's role in connecting the region to broader maritime networks positioned the district as a vital economic hub. However, mid-20th-century modernization efforts shifted economic activity away from the port, leaving the surrounding areas underutilized. Today, the port and its vicinity are characterized by neglect, with wastelands and abandoned infrastructure overshadowing the district's cultural significance.

Efforts to regenerate the waterfront area are underway, with plans to integrate the heritage district into Umm Al Quwain's broader urban framework. These developments aim to restore the historical connection between the district and the port, transforming the area into a cohesive cultural and tourism destination. This reintegration is pivotal to the district's long-term sustainability and its ability to attract both local and international audiences.

3.5.4. Performative Approach

Currently, Umm Al Quwain's heritage district exhibits limited performative engagement, with conservation efforts primarily focused on static presentations of heritage through museums and exhibitions. Although

occasional cultural festivals and events have been held in the district, these activities lack the frequency and scale necessary to establish a dynamic cultural ecosystem.

The district holds significant potential for adopting a more performative approach, wherein spaces are activated through regular programming that fosters interaction between visitors and the historical environment. For example, integrating public art installations, live performances, and community workshops could transform the district into a living cultural space, enhancing its relevance and appeal. Expanding the range of activities to include participatory events would enable the district to evolve into a site of active cultural production rather than a passive historical showcase.

3.5.5. Challenges and Opportunities

Umm Al Quwain Heritage district faces several critical challenges. Its relative isolation from more developed areas of the emirate, coupled with the neglected state of the nearby port, hinders its accessibility and reduces its appeal to visitors. Furthermore, the district's current reliance on static presentations of heritage limits its ability to engage diverse audiences and foster sustained community involvement.

Despite these challenges, the district presents unique growth opportunities. The emirate's ongoing waterfront redevelopment initiatives offer a chance to revitalize the heritage district by enhancing its connectivity and drawing greater tourist traffic. These developments, if carefully managed, could position the district as a cultural and tourism hub that balances historical preservation with modern functionality.

To achieve this, the district must transition from a conservation-focused model to a more integrated approach that incorporates mixed-use development and performative programming. Introducing residential, commercial, and creative industries into the district would ensure year-round vibrancy while fostering local engagement. Additionally, emphasizing sustainable design and community participation in future projects could reinforce the district's role as a living cultural landscape, ensuring its long-term relevance and sustainability.

4. Synthesis and Key Findings

The UAE's heritage strategies reflect a deliberate and sophisticated negotiation between preserving historical authenticity and fostering dynamic cultural engagement. This dual approach—anchored in the interplay between museumification and performativity—has allowed heritage sites to function as both cultural repositories and active urban spaces. Museumification, as exemplified by projects like the Al Shindagha Museum, emphasizes static conservation, focusing on preserving architectural and historical integrity while offering educational and tourism value. In contrast, performativity, demonstrated by the SAF's initiatives, reimagines heritage spaces as dynamic platforms for cultural participation, ensuring their integration into contemporary urban and social life.

This synthesis of strategies responds directly to the UAE's rapid urbanization and modernization. Museumification secures historical narratives and tangible cultural assets, reinforcing national identity and continuity. Meanwhile, performativity ensures these spaces remain relevant by adapting to shifting urban needs and cultural expectations, resonating with a global and local audience. Together, these approaches highlight the UAE's strategic vision: to create heritage frameworks that are simultaneously preservative and innovative, enabling these spaces to serve as vital contributors to cultural, social, and economic growth.

A unifying theme across the case studies is the role of cultural districtification, where historical districts are transformed into multi-dimensional cultural hubs. Projects such as the Heart of Sharjah and the MIZA project in Abu Dhabi demonstrate how adaptive reuse can infuse underutilized heritage spaces with new life, integrating creative industries, fostering urban regeneration, and attracting international audiences. Districtification aligns seamlessly with the UAE's broader ambitions for economic diversification and global cultural prominence, leveraging heritage as a key driver of urban development.

However, these transformations are not without challenges. A recurring issue is the risk of gentrification, where rising property values and rents displace long-standing communities and small businesses, eroding the socio-cultural fabric of heritage districts. Similarly, the commercialization of cultural spaces often prioritizes tourism and affluent audiences over local engagement, reducing authenticity and alienating original residents. This is particularly evident in the episodic vibrancy of many UAE heritage districts, which rely heavily on seasonal events for activation. Outside these periods, these spaces risk falling into dormancy, undermining their potential as year-round community-centred environments.

Temporality presents a significant challenge in the UAE, where the vibrancy of scheduled events often masks the inactivity of heritage spaces during off-peak periods. This dependence on programmed cultural activation highlights the need to reconceptualize heritage districts as continuously active, living environments. To address this, it is essential to redefine the relationship between heritage sites and their surrounding communities, ensuring that these districts remain vibrant and accessible beyond curated events.

Examples such as the Heart of Sharjah offer potential pathways forward. Its mixed-use planning model integrates residential, commercial, and cultural functions, transforming the district into a living ecosystem that balances tourism with sustained local engagement. Similarly, the adaptive reuse strategies employed in the MIZA Project demonstrate how historical infrastructure can be reimagined to meet contemporary cultural and economic needs. These projects exemplify how embedding everyday life into heritage districts can foster inclusivity, vibrancy, and resilience.

Moving forward, a stronger sense of shared ownership and community involvement is essential to the long-term success of the UAE's heritage strategies. Mitigating the risks of over-commercialization while prioritizing accessibility and inclusivity will be critical in preserving the cultural and historical significance of these spaces. Furthermore, the UAE must prioritize sustainability—not only in physical preservation but in fostering long-term cultural, social, and economic relevance. By grounding its heritage districts in both past and present, the UAE can ensure these spaces remain enduring symbols of its evolving identity.

The analysis of these challenges and opportunities is further broken down in Tables 1, 2, and 3, which highlight the key distinctions between the five UAE case studies in terms of public engagement, heritage processing, functionality, and their relation to new port developments.

Table 1. Key differences and challenges from cultural revitalization to gentrification.

	Cultural and economic benefits	Neutral impact/balanced effect	Risks and mitigations
Cultural revitalization	Events like the Sharjah Biennial foster creative energy, attracting global artists and audiences	Increased activity brings temporary vibrancy but may overshadow local heritage narratives	Focus on tourism can alienate residents, requiring initiatives like community-centred programming
Economic development	Boosts tourism and creative sectors, as seen in MIZA's adaptive reuse of warehouses for cultural industries	Economic growth benefits some sectors while leaving others, such as small businesses, struggling to compete	Rapid gentrification can displace original residents: mixed-use planning can help balance commercial and local needs
Preservation of heritage	Adaptive reuse balances historical preservation with modern functionality, as demonstrated by Al Shindagha Museum District	Some interventions maintain heritage integrity but may compromise accessibility or functionality for new uses	Over-commercialization risks commodifying heritage: sustainable tourism models are needed to prevent this
Community engagement	Cultural foundations, like SAF, offer workshops and events that involve the community in creative activities	Engagement can vary: programs may appeal to tourists more than locals, as seen in Al Jazeera Al Hamra's festivals	Alienation of local communities may arise if cultural spaces become exclusionary: participatory planning is essential
Gentrification	Revitalization enhances property values, improving infrastructure and services for the area, as seen in the Heart of Sharjah	Demographic shifts are gradual, with some displacement mitigated by efforts like locally driven-programming	Rapid gentrification risks displacing long-term residents and eroding the community: affordable housing policies and inclusive planning are needed
Authenticity	Enhances a district's unique identity by integrating modern creativity with historical elements, as seen in adaptive reuse at Al Shindagha	Authenticity is preserved in spaces like Al Jazeera Al Hamra but may feel diluted in others due to increased commercial activities	Over-commercialization risks erasing a district's original character: policies prioritizing local heritage and cultural continuity can counteract this
Accessibility	Revitalization improves public spaces and facilitates broader access to cultural events, as seen in Sharjah's mixed-use programming	Accessibility can vary: elite-focused programming in districts like MIZA attracts international audiences but risks alienating lower-income residents	Community-oriented programming can mitigate alienation and promote inclusivity, ensuring local populations benefit alongside tourists
Cultural sustainability	Long-term projects like SAF's residencies sustain cultural growth and heritage preservation by encouraging continuous engagement	Cultural sustainability may become seasonal or event-driven, as seen in episodic festivals like the RAK Fine Arts Festival	Short-term tourism initiatives risk commodifying culture: investing in community-driven programming ensures deeper engagement and continuity

Table 2. Key differences between the five case studies (part 1).

	Public engagement	Presentation of existing architecture	Occupancy patterns	Heritage processing	Cultural objectives	Proximity to port
Al Shindagha	Passive and tourist-driven	Static: focus on preserving historical elements	Permanent but diluted	Museumification	Education and tourism	Indirect: near historic creek
SAF Heart of Sharjah	Active and locally inclusive	Dynamic: a blend of conservation and contemporaneity	Occasional but concentrated	Performative reuse	Cultural revitalization through the arts	Indirect: historic trade route
Al Jazeera Al Hamra	Passive and reflective	Static: minimal intervention	Occasional and diluted	Museumification	Cultural revitalization and tourism	Direct: near the pearling harbour
Umm Al Quwain	Passive and limited	Permanent but diluted	Permanent but underutilized	Urban regeneration	Urban revitalization	Direct: neglected port
MIZA project	Active and focused on creatives	Dynamic: repurposed industrial design	Occasional and adaptive	Industrial heritage reuse	Fosters innovation and creative industries	Proximity to former warehouses

Table 3. Key differences between the five case studies (part 2).

	Public spaces	Connectedness to the rest of the city	Spatial interventions	Functional palette	Proximity to port	Community accessibility
Al Shindagha	Present and accessible	Connected: part of Dubai's creek network	Fixed: focused on preservation	Monofunctional: Museums and tourism services	Indirect: near the historic creek port	Primarily tourist-oriented, with limited local use
SAF Heart of Sharjah	Present and accessible	Connected: integrated into Sharjah's core	Adaptive and changing: supports events	Multifunctional: Cultural, educational, and artistic use	Indirect: historical trading routes	Strong local engagement via workshops and programs
Al Jazeera Al Hamra	Under construction	Remote and poorly integrated	Fixed: stabilization of heritage elements	Monofunctional: Reflective spaces and limited tourism	Direct: historic pearling harbour	Passive and reflective: limited active community engagement
Umm Al Quwain	Limited and under construction	Close but underdeveloped	Fixed: focused on reconstruction	Multifunctional: Museums, exhibitions, and cultural spaces	Direct: neglected modern port	Minimal community use, with occasional cultural events
MIZA project	Industrial spaces repurposed into accessible public venues	Remote but accessible	Ongoing: focuses on creative reuse	Multifunctional: Art studios, retail, and workshops	N/A: proximity to former port warehouses	Active creative community focus and limited broader accessibility

5. Conclusion

The UAE's approach to ports, heritage, and urban transformation reflects the complex balance between cultural preservation and economic modernization. Ports and their proximity in the UAE are not merely logistical or economic hubs; they serve as dynamic spaces where cultural, social, and spatial forces intersect. By positioning heritage as both a foundation for national identity and a catalyst for urban regeneration, the UAE demonstrates the potential to integrate its historical legacy with the demands of contemporary development.

Understanding ports and their proximities demands a multidisciplinary perspective that transcends the quantitative assessment of trade and infrastructure. Ports shape urban environments in profound and multifaceted ways, influencing cultural memory, social identities, and spatial dynamics. In the UAE, ports have evolved into multidimensional spaces where economic activity, cultural preservation, and urban growth converge. Addressing these complexities requires approaches informed by urban planning, architecture, cultural studies, and economics, reflecting the inherently interdisciplinary nature of port-urban interactions.

Unlike traditional port-city models that are gradually shaped in Europe or Asia, the UAE's approach is defined by oil revenues, centralized governance, and rapid modernization. The fast pace of this transformation reshaped coastal landscapes and produced urban heritage fragments that, while residual, carry significant cultural value. Current strategies aim to reverse and reshape these patterns, leveraging heritage and port proximities to craft new urban narratives. This dual process—reshaping and reverse shaping—highlights how ports and heritage have become critical to redefining the UAE's urban landscapes, offering both opportunities and challenges in fostering sustainable growth.

The ongoing construction and repurposing of smaller ports across the UAE and the Gulf region adds a competitive dimension to these transformations. Intensifying competition for trade, tourism, and cultural capital invites a rethinking of how ports influence urban spaces. Historical districts must remain central to these evolving strategies to preserve their cultural and spatial relevance. This raises broader questions: How will the expansion of smaller ports reshape Gulf cities and redefine regional dynamics? What role will they play in the geopolitical and economic landscape of the Gulf? These inquiries highlight the importance of exploring how port development fosters urban innovation, regional competitiveness, and cultural cohesion.

Nevertheless, the UAE's model is not without its challenges. The emphasis on fluidity and adaptability risks over-commercialization, gentrification, and reliance on episodic cultural activation. Many heritage districts face difficulties sustaining year-round engagement often depending on seasonal events and tourism-driven programming that may exclude local communities. Ensuring resilience in these spaces requires more than heritage preservation; it demands mixed-use planning, participatory development, and sustainable urban design that balances global aspirations with the needs of local populations.

The UAE's strategies illustrate that heritage is not static; it is an active driver of cultural vitality and urban vibrancy. However, they also provoke critical questions: Who benefits from these transformations? How can cultural integrity be preserved in the face of economic pressures? And how can heritage districts remain inclusive while competing for global recognition in cultural and economic spheres?

Ultimately, the UAE provides a compelling but context-specific model for reimagining ports and their proximities as integral components of urban futures. While not universally applicable, it offers valuable insights into the interplay of heritage preservation, urban regeneration, and economic development. By viewing ports as multidimensional spaces that extend beyond logistics to encompass cultural and social dimensions, scholars, policymakers, and planners can advance a deeper understanding of their transformative potential. This underscores the need for future research to explore these intersections critically, fostering innovative approaches to sustainable urbanization and regional competitiveness.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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