

THE SAADIYAT ISLAND CULTURAL DISTRICT IN ABU DHABI

ABU DHABI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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Introduction

The concept of cultural quarters or districts is based on the seminal work by Jacobs (1970), Marshall (1920) and Schumpeter (1934). The concept, developed in the back of economic geography context (Monk and Monk 2007), has received considerable attention and has grown exponentially in terms of popularity. Essentially, cluster (or geographical district) formation and emergence can be attributed to the emphasis placed on the encouragement of industrial clusters in early 1950s as a response to declining post-industrialised economies and economically deprived locations (at either the local, regional or national level). Marshall himself considered the spatial concentration of factors of production as an essential step in the realisation of pecuniary, agglomeration and labour externalities. Porter (1990) then argued that 'geographically localised' or 'clustered' firms could potentially enhance economic growth.

In culture and tourism settings, the concept has proven to be considerably popular among researchers, practitioners and managers alike, despite its relative short association with either of the two sectors. Basically, the argument is that clustering of cultural tourism resources in close geographical vicinity is an important influential factor on urban development (Zheng 2011). According to Scott (2004, 2006) cultural quarters can be described as cultural production centres providing conducive cultural environment and scope for better economic achievement and entrepreneurship (Heur 2009). In particular, the emergence of cultural quarters as facilitators of local economic growth and development is based upon the conceptualisation of cultural heritage as capital (Rizzo and Throsby 2006, Scott 1997). Thus, cultural heritage capital may be conceived as a resource with a high economic potential (Ashworth and Voogd 1986). The literature in the area has provided a rich account of case studies and relevant papers applying the concept of cultural quarter or district as a form of policy panacea to solve local economic development and other economic related objectives (Bassett et al. 2002).

Abu Dhabi Cultural Quarter

Recently, the Abu Dhabi Administration has publicised its intentions to break away from the monoculture economy relying heavily on oil reserves, by taping more systematically on to the tourism industry, following the example of neighbouring Dubai. The intention in Abu Dhabi is to build on Dubai's successful practices without repeating the same mistakes (tourism on a mass scale, emergence of prostitution and gambling, exclusion of indigenous population from the property market) (Henderson 2006, Ponzini 2011). Abu Dhabi's objective as stated in the promotional literature is 'not to become a commoditised destination for mass tourism.' Reflecting on the intention of the Emirate to offer a unique tourist experience, Abu Dhabi tourism authorities have focused on the evolution of cultural and heritage tourism in the area.

In an effort to create a destination of international standing, and at the same time differentiate the nature of the economy, Abu Dhabi authorities have recently embarked on a very ambitious project. Their plan is to create a cultural district that would house and accommodate local as well as international cultural expressions. This project, called Saadiyat island cultural quarter, is expected to be completed in 2015 and is expected to lure tourists to the emirate and at the same time create jobs in the cultural sector for UAE citizens (*The Financial Times*, 24 January 2012). As part of this objective, Abu Dhabi is planning to create a 670-acre cultural district (the Cultural District of Saadiyat Island) with the purpose of creating a cultural oasis in the desert.

The Saadiyat island cultural quarter development has been put forward by the Abu Dhabi emirate in order to create a major cultural 'oasis' in the Middle East region (Department of Planning and Economy, 2009; Oxford Business Group, 2007).

In this respect the 670 acres, Saadiyat island cultural quarter (SICQ) development aims to become a cultural centre that could accommodate culture and cultural resources from the whole region, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE) area (Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority, 2007a, b). As the second largest city of the UAE, Abu Dhabi hopes to lure more tourism through a massive project on Saadiyat Island located along the coast of the city. The district wants to draw 3 million tourists by the year 2015.

According to the plans being unveiled by AD authorities, the SICQ development is going to include:

- The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (based on Frank Gehry's concept, this will be the largest Guggenheim museum in the world, with approximately 130,000 square feet of exhibition space);
- The Louvre Abu Dhabi (a classical museum);
- The Sheikh Zayed National Museum (a museum devoted to the history and traditions of

Abu Dhabi and the legacy of the emirate's much admired late ruler His Highness Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan;

- A performing arts centre (a museum presenting the best that the UAE has to offer in terms of music, theatre and dance);

- A maritime museum (a museum reflecting the rich maritime history of the UAE and the Arabian Gulf).

In total, the SICQ will include 5 landmark museums, 29 hotels, around 8,000 residential properties, 3 harbours, 1 park, 1 golf course and 1 sailing club. Each one of the 5 museums (Louvre Abu Dhabi, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Zayed National Museum, a maritime museum, and a performing arts centre) has been designed by a world renowned architect. Ultimately, the objective would be to create a cultural landmark which every western tourist would have to visit. It is envisaged that this would allow the Emirate to diversify its monoculture economic base and compete on equal grounds with other Middle Eastern destinations (Devlin and Page 1999, Garb 2004, Krens 2007). Emirate authorities have signed agreements with the Louvre and the Guggenheim museums for long term loans to be exhibited in the Abu Dhabi cultural district once this is completed.

Novelty in Operations

Abu Dhabi's objectives behind the development of a cultural/creative quarter have been different from those of other destinations (Zheng 2011, Scott 2006). Sharpley (2003) as well as Al-Hamarneh and Steiner (2004) indicated long ago that one particular challenge faced by Abu Dhabi Emirate in its effort to develop a successful and sustainable tourism industry was its run down and dilapidated stock of resources. Sharpley (2003) and Hall (2000) have argued that focusing on culture and the provision of cultural tourism resources capable of luring local, regional as well as international tourists could provide a solution to this challenge. This assertion, relating to the provision of major developments and the financial support of mega- projects as pillars of tourism development in a destination has been greatly facilitated through the concept of cultural quarters, or cultural districts throughout the world. In this respect, (actual or prospective) destinations such as Abu Dhabi envisage that the spatial agglomeration of cultural resources could generate a comparative advantage for the destination. However, the process of generating a comparative advantage in cultural tourism in SICQ follows a slightly different pathway. Policy officials and planners in Abu Dhabi have recognised that utilising a local-global nexus to permeate their operations could offer them the chance to retain their comparative advantage in the long term. Hence, the concept of sustainable comparative advantage, as opposed to comparative advantage. In other words, policy makers have recognised that relying on mega structures and world renowned architects alone (both examples of push marketing strategies) is not enough anymore. These marketing strategies are geared towards the pushing power of world brands and names to attract visitors to the area. For that reason, the Abu Dhabi

administration has put forward a cultural tourism strategy that would attract major brand names in the area, but also actively promoting local artists and indigenous cultural heritage at the same time. The objective here is to obtain the maximum degree of visibility and exposure to a globalised market, and promote local culture at the same time. Although these practices have been adopted many times, this does not mean that they have always generated the same level of success. This is partly down to their 'passive' and 'low value' nature. Relying on mostly imported talent and resources would probably be adequate to attract an international audience in the region at the beginning, but would not manage to create a strong sense of local cultural entrepreneurship and revitalisation leading to urban regeneration. Focusing equally on attracting global (mostly imported) resources, as well as facilitating the production of local (native) cultural resources and output offers a novel way to urban regeneration through cultural quarter developments. Thus, adopting a local-global nexus as far as Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island cultural quarter is concerned could ensure long-term sustainability of comparative advantage. Instead, pulling marketing strategies tend to focus more on the utilisation and exploitation of the comparative advantage generated through local differences and variations. These pulling marketing strategies entail retailers or policy makers identifying the features and attributes of the local or domestic supply that are mostly appealing to customers and provide them – supply and demand in its purest form. This is the basis of a pull strategy. Create the demand, and the supply channels will almost look after themselves. Or in other words, a globalised strategy with a local twist.

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