

## Visual Spaces of Change

*Photographic documentation of environmental transformations*



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## **Replacing urban identity: the disappearance of Sha'biya Al Safa Neighborhood**

Luca Donner, Francesca Sorcinelli

### **Abstract**

The meaning of identity of a place is manifested in its *genius loci*, or rather in the hidden spirit of the place itself. The immanent value of the built environment represents its physical and materic sedimentation, as well as the collective memory testifies to the emotional stratification of the space itself. The spatial component involves not only the sphere of urban form and public spaces, but also the private dimension of domesticity. It is a process of accumulation of the historical memory of a place, through fragments of shared community life as well as of family and domestic identities. In this sense, the theme of loss of urban historical memory in newly developed contexts, in cities such as Dubai for example, appears relevant. Furthermore, how in such areas the built environment is suddenly altered by the dynamics of real estate.

This contribution documents, also by means of photography, the case of the disappearance of *Sha'biya Al Safa Neighborhood* (also known as *Sha'biya Al Shorta*). Neighborhood built to house the low-income local population, as part of the social housing program wanted by the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan since the end of the 1960s. These photos, taken in September 2018, document the state of the neighborhood shortly before its demolition, when its inhabitants had already abandoned this place. Instead, the pictures taken in February 2021 describe the current state of the area: an infrastructured *tabula rasa* ready for real estate development.

The images narrate the loss of daily living in the neighborhood. They speak of a community, which has now disappeared, characterized by a vibrant everyday life with cultural values rooted in the place and tradition. It is a visual testimony that identifies the urban peculiarities of the neighborhood in its morphological and typological dimension, as well as reveals the traces of the family life of its inhabitants. This case documents, once again, how urban transformations based on demolition and new construction inevitably lead to a zeroing of the original social identity and of the collective memory connected to the place itself.

Keywords: *urban identity; urban transformation; domesticity; social housing; Dubai*

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The meaning of identity of a place is manifested in its *genius loci*, or rather in the hidden spirit of the place itself. The immanent value of the built environment represents its physical and materic sedimentation, as well as the collective memory testifies to the emotional stratification of the space itself. The spatial component involves not only the sphere of urban form and public spaces, but also the private dimension of domesticity.

We are facing a process of collective and individual appropriation at the same time. A double layer of stratification that defines the historical memory of a place. It is a collective urban identity that bases its being on the accumulation of individual family and domestic identities.

The transitory aspect of this process establishes its intrinsic paradigmatic value. Just as temporality marks its narrative and perceptive evolution. The spirit of a place thus manifests itself as the sedimentation of social relations, collective and individual emotions, as well as events. It is an osmosis between the built environment and its inhabitants. In this sense, "House is city and city is house" as stated by Aldo van Eyck.<sup>1</sup>

That is to say, there is a symbiosis between our dwell and the city that welcomes us and we identify that intersection as home. An essential one-to-one relationship, based on diaphragmatic relationships, and at the basis of the very concept of identity of the place and its authenticity.

These are phenomenological transitions that involve the social, communicative and relational aspects of communities with their own urban environment of reference. The neighborhood represents the core of this relational system. And when this urban element, or one of these factors, fails, the very structure of the city is involved and altered.

Even in a relatively recent city like Dubai, the disappearance of entire neighborhoods takes shape not only as a significant change in the built environment, but also as loss of the emotional qualities of that specific urban fabric, i.e. a zeroing of social dynamics, identity and community that over time have settled there.

"Every building, alley, empty land-space-is a place that carries intentions that are more or less noble, more or less conscious, and more or less aesthetically expressed. These inanimate spaces are the scenarios that give life to the memory of the city, within these structures comes the knowledge of the city".<sup>2</sup>

In the recent past, the districts of Al Satwa and Al Wasl are perhaps among the most emblematic cases of the rapid urban change underway in Dubai.

1 Daniele Pisani, "The City of Architecture", in "The Architecture of the City. A Palimpsest", eds. Victoria Easton, Matilde Cassani, and Noura Al Sayeh, *CHARTA*, no.2 (September 2016), 47.

2 Cruz-Megchun, Beatriz and Juan Roldán Martín, "Cricket fields: instruments of place-making and memory in the UAE", in *Uncommon Dubai +*, ed. Sharmeen Inayat (Ta Xbiex, Malta: Uncommon Ltd, 2018), 46.

The process of “bulimic” real estate development has led, as a consequence, to apply the principle of *tabula rasa* to large areas of the city and, consequently, to the historical memory of these communities. To date, only marginal urban traces remain of what these places were.

Sha'biya Al Safa Neighborhood (Fig.1) can be considered as the last portion of Sha'biya Al Shorta to have been demolished in the Al Wasl district.

A fact that appears even more paradoxical if we think of the etymological meaning of Al Wasl: “meeting point”.<sup>3</sup>

Al Shorta (and therefore also Sha'biya Al Safa) was born thanks to the National Housing Program which had its greatest development in the United Arab Emirates between the 1960s and 1980s. The Program of “people’s houses” (sha'bi houses), wanted by the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan founding father of UAE, was conceived to house and settle the local Bedouin populations.<sup>4</sup>

For many it represented the transition from Areesh Houses (one-storey dwellings built with palm fronds) to a stable housing condition in better sanitary conditions.

Subsequently, as happened for example in the district of Al Satwa, populations from other countries alternated in many cases with the resident Emirati population.<sup>5</sup> This change occurred as a result of the relocation of most of the Emirati population to other areas made available also thanks to government incentives coming from the current Sheikh Zayed Housing Program.

The 419 houses of Sha'biya Al Safa (aka Al Shorta) were built in the early 1970s, ranging in size from two to five rooms and mostly single-storey, as residences for members of the army and police, but then also inhabited by people from Oman, Yemen and Union of the Comoros.<sup>6</sup> Their planimetric arrangement was based on an urban pattern oriented according to three different directions. Just as the single urban elements were made up of an uninterrupted sequence of housing units that shared three perimeter walls with the adjacent ones. They were structured around a courtyard (final result of the perimeter wall) and based on a prefabricated system with modular elements. Over time they were subject to various changes and additions by the residents, who adapted the layout and aesthetics to the changing family needs and lifestyle of individual households.<sup>7</sup>

3 Jalal Abuthina, *Dubai: behind the scenes* (Dubai: Inside Dubai, 2015), 13.

4 Yasser Elsheshtawy, ed. *Transformations: The Emirati National House* (Abu Dhabi: National Pavilion United Arab Emirates la Biennale di Venezia, 2016).

5 Yasser Elsheshtawy, “Foreword”, in *Memories of Satwa*, ed. Jalal Abuthina (Dubai: Inside Dubai, 2015), 2–4.

6 Khaled Alawadi, ed. *Lifescapes Beyond Bigness*. (London: Artifice Press, 2018), 122–123.

7 Ibid.



[Fig. 1]  
Luca Donner and Francesca Sorcinelli, Sha'biya Al Safa Neighborhood, 2018





"The sha'bi house was thus a blank canvas, a basic framework, within which various elements of Bedouin life could be placed".<sup>8</sup>

More in general, the social matrix of the Sha'bi Houses, aimed at the disadvantaged and less affluent population. Consequently, it defined also the dynamics of daily life that took place within neighborhoods built for this purpose. These communities were identified by a varied and vibrant world, direct manifestation of local cultural values and of a population characterized by a complex and deep-rooted identity.

The urban paradigm of these neighborhoods was (and still is in existing cases) based on low-rise buildings and high density. Just as the typology of courtyard house historically represents the physical manifestation of a strong sense of belonging. That is, the direct expression of the local tradition based on the sacredness of domestic dominion. The privacy of the family is established and maintained through the morphology of the house itself. The dwell threshold defines the limit between the private and public domains (similarly to what happened in the Roman *domus*). The *majilis*, the domestic space dedicated to conviviality with people out of the family sphere, represents the mediation element within this dual social system. The typical-house layout hierarchy, although declined in countless variations, is clear and founded according to a sequence of spaces arranged along its perimeter wall. It is an introverted conception of the domestic space. Such established limit creates a tension between the socio-urban environment and the safeness of the private domain. These houses, with their high perimeter walls, courtyards and thresholds, together with the neighborhood grocery store, constitute the memory of the place, the very identity of Sha'biya Al Safa. That is, that one-to-one relationship is created between physical signs of the past and collective consciousness linked to events and rituals. By analogy, similarly the way Marco Polo describes the city of Zaira al Kublai Kan:

"I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways, and the degree of the arcades" curves, and what kind of zinc scales cover the roofs; but I already know this would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past [...] As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands. A description of Zaira as it is today should contain all Zaira's past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the Bags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls."<sup>9</sup>

It is therefore the "signs" or "traces" of everyday life that identify history of places, whether they are a small village, a district or a city. They establish an atmosphere that "[...] involves judgements beyond the five Aristotelian senses, such as sensations of orientation, gravity, balance, stability, motion, duration, continuity, scale and illumination"<sup>10</sup>.

8 Elsheshtawy, *Transformations: The Emirati National House*, 29

9 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974), 10–11.

10 Juhani Pallasmaa, *Fragments: Collage and Discontinuity in Architectural Imagery*, ed. trans. Matteo Zambelli (Pordenone: Giavedoni editore, 2012), 172–173.



[Fig. 2]  
Luca Donner and Francesca Sorcinelli,  
Shared community spaces, 2018



[Fig. 3w]  
Luca Donner and Francesca Sorcinelli,  
House courtyard, 2018

The documented scenario (Fig.1-6), dating back to September 2018, testify how the inhabitants abandoned this neighborhood, shortly before its demolition. They are evidence of "traces" of living narrative in public spaces, as well as of dwelling domesticity.

The description of this neighborhood must inevitably start from community spaces, aka *sikka*, sandy streets between segments of the urban settlement. In this case, larger than usual, compared to the ones in the historic district of Al Bastakiya, where instead their main feature is being narrow and exclusively pedestrian.

It is clear how planning in Sha'biya Al Safa (early 1970s) took into consideration car mobility in designing *sikkas*, even without defining actual roads. In spite of this, these are not only spaces between urban blocks, but above all places of socialization and interpersonal interaction, far from the "non-places"<sup>11</sup> of the adjacent glittering city. They represent the realm of getting together, chatting, sharing, playing. Outside the houses, along the *sikkas*, there are in most of cases armchairs or sofas for this purpose (Fig. 2). Here the community meets and shares stories, local traditions and ancient knowledge. The oral tradition passes, or rather, it went through here, building over time that sense of belonging typical of each community. In this regard, Walter Benjamin wrote:

"Streets are the dwelling place of the collective. The collective is an eternally unquiet, eternally agitated being that - in the space between the building fronts - experiences, learns, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls. [...] The street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses."<sup>12</sup>

Paradoxically, after being a place full of life, in September 2018, this place looked like a ghost neighborhood. Only the "traces" left by their former residents left a memory of what it meant to live here. Iron entrance doors decorated with colorful motifs, the large house numbers painted on the exterior walls as well as the ornate balustrades on the roof, where the large water tanks and dish antennas were placed. And where, during hot summer evenings, before the advent of ceiling fans or air conditioning, the family could sleep at night, according to local habits.

The documented scenario appears similar to the one of a suddenly abandoned place due to a radioactive event, as it happened in the case of Chernobyl or more recently Fukushima. Obviously this is not the case, but nevertheless, the "traces" within the urban settlement remind us of similar events. And, after crossing the threshold of any of these houses, the interior spaces also tell us about this sudden abandonment.

Leaving home always causes an inner laceration for what you leave behind. Detachment means losing something of oneself and one's identity, since the latter always exists in relation to the other.

<sup>11</sup> Marc Augé, *Non Luoghi*

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. D. Rolland D. and C. Milani (Milano: Eleuthera, 2015), 423.



[Fig. 4]  
Luca Donner and Francesca Sorcinelli, *Bedroom*, 2018



[Fig. 5]  
Luca Donner and Francesca Sorcinelli, Kitchen, 2018



[Fig. 6]

Luca Donner and Francesca Sorcinelli, *Former residents' personal belongings*, 2018

In this sense, the testimonies collected among the residents of Shabiya Al Safa, at the end of 2017, by Khaled Alawadi and his research group about the news of its future demolition were placed<sup>13</sup>.

The domestic spaces therefore narrate the intensity and intimacy of living as well as its diachronic component. It is in fact within the superimposition of these "traces" that we can identify the complexity of the family hierarchical structure, as well as its own history and intrinsic beauty. Because, nothing of what we perceive dominates the context, just as Calvino describes the city of Zora.

"Zora has the quality of remaining in your memory point by point, in its succession of streets, of houses along the streets, and of doors and windows in the houses, though nothing in them possesses a special beauty or rarity. Zora's secret lies in the way your gaze runs over patterns following one another as in a musical score where not a note can be altered or displaced."<sup>14</sup>

This feeling stands within the Sha'bi houses of Al Safa as well. The courtyard represents the only unifying typological element which, together with the perimeter wall, binds all spaces of the house that overlook it (Fig. 3) and which ultimately defines the settlement paradigm itself. The spatial hierarchy is characterized by this void, an outdoor environment that defines the very zoning of the house and its own indoor dynamics. By entering the domestic spaces, one can recognize the identity signs of the peculiar memory of each family environment. Those who lived here often left behind furniture, toys and furnishings. Wallpapers on the walls, colorful bedrooms (Fig. 4), essential kitchens (Fig. 5), sofas, wardrobes and chest of drawers are "traces" in this sense. But many personal belongings are also part of this surreal scenario: school texts, shoes and clothes (Fig. 6).

Domestic everyday life is revealed in all its vitality and expressive force, also through exuberant chromaticity in contrast to the more modest exteriors based on neutral tones. In this case, the threshold represents the physical element of demarcation between public and private, between sharing with the community and family privacy. Point of mediation and negotiation between different experiences, values and relationships, because "a boundary is not that at which something stops but, as Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing"<sup>15</sup>. The limit, therefore, understood as the potential of living, a phenomenological expression of the very proximity of living. It's sedimentation of memory based on several osmotic levels: the environmental context, the socio-cultural component and domestic intimacy.

As sociologist Martinotti stated, there is a city that is inseparable from its context, but which at the same time cannot be "physically" measured, that is, the one which is cause and effect at the same time: urban society<sup>16</sup>. This thought must make us think about the role of collective memory, even in a place of recent development such as Dubai.

13 Alawadi, *Lifescapes Beyond Bigness*, 133-142.

14 Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 15.

15 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971), part II.

16 Guido Martinotti, *Sei lezioni sulla città*, ed. Serena Vicari Haddock (Milano: Feltrinelli Editore, 2017), 30.

The demolition of Sha'biya Al Safa and the subsequent re-urbanization of the area, as documented in February 2021 (Fig. 7), speak of a zeroing of the historical memory of this place to make way for a new real estate development. A *tabula rasa* that erases not only part of the urban context, but also the socio-connective fabric that characterized it. Social relationships between the residents who lived there have been lost as well their ties with this place suddenly dissolved. A network of daily interactions built on shared routine. Children playing along the sikkas, talks among neighbors while sitting on the sofa outside the front door or elderly proudly taking care of their own vegetable garden. Community also means this.

In fact, we should always remember what Shakespeare wrote: "What is the city but people?"<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> William Shakespeare, "Coriolanus., Act 3, Scene 1", accessed August 2, 2021, <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/coriolanus/coriolanus.3.1.html>.