

Reviewing Tourism and Urban Development in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

Cities are emerging as tourist hubs and heritage-based leisure is central to economic diversification strategies that improve conditions to residents and visitors. Within this context, urban tourism has gained prominence in the international travel market. Considering the expansion of tourism in the Arabian Gulf States, it is important to reflect on the role it can play in the expansion strategies of cities, building on global practice. This paper explores a particular aspect of this reality, namely the incorporation of heritage elements and their commodification in the urban setting of the United Arab Emirates. It elaborates on recent sources and addresses related issues such as cultural preservation, destination branding, and economic impact. The results consist of an overview of the balance between benefits and drawbacks when using urban heritage features as a tool for tourism development.

Keywords: *Tourism, Communities, UAE, Urban Planning*

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Introduction

Urban heritage is routinely mobilized by local administrations as a competitive placemaking asset, even though its effective economic advantages remain unevenly understood, particularly in the context of tourism. A destination can be simply defined as the location tourists are attracted to and where they spend the night. The combined arrangement of cultural tourism supply, demand, and governance instruments, however, involves such a multitude of interacting players and features that a destination experience becomes subjective and contextual. This has been a mainstream perception for at least a quarter of a century (Cooper, 2008; Buhalis, 2000) and was progressively applied to urban heritage, from the angles of neighborhood regeneration (Lak, Gheitasi, and Timothy, 2020), digital conservation (Ocón, 2021), and smart governance in destination management (Mandic and Kennell, 2021). More specifically, this integrated concept of a heritage tourist destination refers to several urban setups used for providing visitor services such as tour guiding, leisure programming, retail and dining, and accommodation to tourists (Ashworth and Page, 2011; Ashworth, 2000; Page, 1995). The seminal and currently acknowledged idea of distinctiveness in the urban tourism product was conceptualized a generation ago (Jansen-Verbeke, 1988; Pearce, 2001; Selby, 2003; Edwards, Griffin, and Hayllar, 2008, to indicate but a few of the prolific outputs of the time). All such references include, in some form or shape, the combination of historic buildings, urban landscapes, museums and art galleries, theatres, sports, and events. Against this backdrop, the proposition developed below is that the most sustainable uses of urban heritage occur when (i) UAE heritage significance is defined with, by, and for local communities, (ii) correlated branding incorporates place-specific attractions, and (iii) planning aligns with both tourism strategies and conservation. This claim is corroborated through comparative international frameworks, adapted to the UAE market via governance practice in urban settings. In addition to sociocultural benefits, potential risks such as museumification, intra-city displacement, and over-commodification need to be taken into account.

A simplification of the rationale is graphically represented in Figure 1. Tangible built resources and their associated intangibles produce enablers (the management of rapid progress through governance, funding, and infrastructure development), physical interfaces (dependent on overlapping and intersecting scales), and outcomes (commodification, livability, visitor value, conservation status). Arrows represent feedback loops towards future resource performance, in the form of public administration, state-led heritage delivery, and market impacts.



Figure 1. Synopsis of the reviewed concepts and their articulation.

Discussion

Following a long period during which coastal destinations represented the main sources of tourist attraction, cities have emerged as increasingly important destinations in the international context, through affordable transport, increased mobility, travel facilitation, digital platforms for property renting and hospitality services (UNWTO, 2020), gaining significant market share in the global tourism market. This led to a reframing of current urban tourism, more process-based and co-productive, including the transversal learning experience of all participants (Koens, 2021). More than half of the world's population lives in urban areas and this proportion is expected to rise to 68% by 2050 (WTTC, 2019). Such growth in urban tourism created a need in the literature to align tourism development models with the livability and sustainability of cities, essential for all stakeholders – residents, visitors, and local communities (Yoopetch, 2022). Traditional development of urban tourism (through Western-inspired models that tended to prioritize historic centers, flagship museums, and event led regeneration to shape urban tourism appeal; see Page, 1995; Ashworth and Page, 2011) took form especially in Europe and North America, yet the globalized emergence of cities in Asia and the Middle East has created hotspots for attracting international heritage-sensitive visitors. Recent rankings based on arrivals, overnights, and spending show twelve of the top 20 cities are in Asia, including Dubai (Mastercard, 2023), which reflects a geographic rebalancing of urban tourism demand. Common regional challenges in the Gulf include conserving fast-eroding built fabric, engaging high-turnover expat majorities with narratives of place, mitigating overcrowding at hyper-branded heritage clusters, and balancing mega-project timelines with conservation (Maxim, 2020; Malek and Badaruddin, 2014). The wider Asian urban reality indeed produced multiple national and local studies, including on increasingly relevant second-tier destinations (Keitsch, 2020; Dolezal, Trupp, and Bui, 2020; Ludwig, Walton, and Wang, 2020; Fakfare, Talawanich, and Wattanacharoensil, 2020; Hitchcock, 2021).

For heritage, the COVID-19 pandemic ended up accelerating digital forms of interpretation, and resident-first programming aimed at domestic tourism (Guerreiro, 2022; Ocón, 2021). Cities worldwide performed rather differently in terms of travel and tourism results and some long-haul destinations had to cope with challenges in demand (Anguera-Torrell, Vives-Perez, and Aznar-Alarcón, 2021). Still, comparative analyses of Asian tourism destinations demonstrate the sector's structural complexity and overall economic growth potential, as evidenced by participatory governance, growingly diverse source markets, and transnational connectivity that, in combination, illustrate a resilient demand (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2021). This affirmation of the entire continent in terms of urban tourism and urban reconfiguration justifies a summarized review of knowledge, still neglected in the literature (Hua and Wondirad, 2021), to address key topics from the perspective of Sustainable Development Goals (Trupp and Dolezal, 2020) by taking a well-known western Asian territory, namely the United Arab Emirates, as a case study. In urban contexts, cultural heritage tourism operates by activating combinations of tangibles and events. These variables can be seasonal or temporary in the UAE's historic districts, even if buildings are to be maintained permanently and are therefore costly to maintain in low seasons such as the peak of the summer. Al Fahidi / Al Shindagha in Dubai and the Heart of Sharjah are documented examples in which public management needs to be complemented by private entrepreneurship.

Locality

The geographic reality is a strong determinant for a successful integration of urban heritage and cannot be replicated beyond generic universal agendas and legal guidelines. Geological features, coastline morphology, hydrological systems, and temperature variations condition both visitor carrying capacity and conservation of built structures. In the case of the UAE, the conjugation of seemingly uneven dynamics, opposing rapid progress and tradition, creates permanent challenges for urban planning. Timelines for land development and new construction in sensitive areas need to consider extensive surveying, use of traditional materials, and community consultation. This slows down real estate and public infrastructure expansion. A result of this tension is the formation of heritage clusters, some of which display features of organic expansion while others are fully pre-planned (De Man and Hassan, 2023). The underlying concern is that of preserving elements of architectural authenticity, even heavily staged and fabricated ones, while simultaneously pushing forward ultramodern construction, without losing beacons of identity. Despite the substantial inherent limitations (Saleh et al., 2022), this process of ensuring sustainable city growth has been well studied in metropolises such as Dubai (Pineda, 2020), Abu Dhabi (López Reus, El Amrousi, and Paleologos, 2020), as well as Sharjah (Jumah, 2020), where large-scale areas function as protected cultural heritage attractions. Most towns and cities, however, are subject to a much lower demographic pressure and find location-specific solutions for traditional spaces serving contemporary needs. These are the result of substantial changes in the urban fabric throughout the UAE since the mid-1970s, before which communities lived in concentrated, high-density, and walkable spaces, whereas recent evolution disrupted traditional forms. Historically, fareej neighborhoods consisted of clustered courtyard houses that favor shade and airflow, connected by narrow sikkas (passages) that led towards mosques and communal spaces. Car-oriented plans caused the disruption of previous environments (Shublaq et al., 2022). Attempts to reinvent old-style pedestrian and proximity layouts in cities such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi have had mixed results. While projects did improve wayfinding and tangible heritage conservation, the retention of residents and neighborhood retail activity was a challenge (Alawadi, Khaleel and Benkraouda, 2021). Urban regeneration planning in core areas, as is the case with Deira, to be followed by Al Karama and Al Satwa, ought to target not only transportation and building infrastructures, but social and cultural ones as well (Awad and Jung, 2022). Parallel efforts include the Qasr Al Hosn complex and Saadiyat's cultural cluster, both in Abu Dhabi; the Heart of Sharjah; the Dhayah and Al Mareer old town initiatives in Ras Al Khaimah and Ajman, respectively; the fort area in Fujairah; and the old town waterfront in Umm Al Quwain (Hilal et al., 2015; Vij and Verma, 2016; Boudiaf et al., 2020; Salameh and Touqan, 2023). All these types of heritage investment are to be articulated with purely residential and professional expectations of the community, comprising Emirati citizens, long-term Arab and South Asian residents, temporary expatriate workers, heritage practitioners, cultural entrepreneurs, and domestic visitors. Gentrification and touristification worldwide can affect the lifestyle of migrant laborers and low-income renters when regeneration raises costs, and this is a process to be monitored in the UAE as well.

Governmental efforts to stimulate domestic real estate expansion in the UAE within a pattern of sustainable economic growth have been coupled with other sectors such as finance and tourism (Adel, 2022), fitting an increasingly complex academic debate on the influence of leisure and tourism on urban change (Khater and Faik, 2025). It centers on whether cul-

tural tourism produces inclusive regeneration or if it leads to displacement and monoculture instead. The UAE is able to expedite execution through top-down delivery and avoids an over-programming of heritage visitor attractions at the expense of other spaces (Page and Duignan, 2023) by expanding boundaries. The translation of federal directives into emirate-level and urban realities has direct implications on urban spatial strategies, in the scope of economic decentralization (Arif and Aldosary, 2023), in which the principles of collaborative urban planning (Meetiyyagoda et al., 2023) assume a significant function. Cultural stakeholder consultations, such as those carried out for historic districts (Awad and Jung, 2022; Karakus and Hasan, 2023), allow for participatory feedback. In this regard, quite some attention has been given to the link between traditional culture and urban development, especially through energy-efficient and ecological communities. Passive cooling methods, mixed-use clustering, and walkability are often reinvented heritage elements applied to the design of Masdar and the Dubai and Sharjah Sustainable Cities (Ibrahim, 2020; Pineda, 2020). These eco-cities stem from the same framework that produces urban tourism initiatives (El Shafaki et al., 2024) and replicate traditional ways of life in a modernized setting. Sustainability is transversal to all these projects and some formulas are replicated locally, with emirate-level strategies converging on energy codes, retrofit standards, and heritage buffers (Labadi et al., 2021; UNWTO, 2020).

Municipalization is a comparatively recent phenomenon in the UAE and was, to a large degree, developed to cope with the fast-developing urban environment (Assi, 2020). Without exception, municipal efforts adhere to the stipulated guidelines for optimizing traditional features within a very transformed layout. Urban heritage revivalism, based on certain aesthetics and planned iconography, has been regularly used for consumer-ready tourism but is instrumental as well to narratives on local identities (Frymoyer, 2023). Conspicuous examples are the revamping of traditional quarters within historic centers, even if most surviving components are entirely contemporary in date. Many traditional elements are in fact reconstructions based on archaeological or archival plans and therefore maintain limited original fabric. This common regional conservation practice privileges form and narrative at the expense of strict materiality (Wakefield, 2020). The central heritage districts and other historic areas in Ajman (Salameh and Touqan, 2023), Ras Al Khaimah (Hilal, Kennet, and Humble, 2015), Fujairah (Vij and Verma, 2016), and Umm Al Quwain (Boudiaf, Awad, and Mekky, 2020) are all deemed strategically relevant to the advancement of heritage tourism, with the specific aim of providing additional sources of income to the population, among other resolutions related to improving destination experience for suppliers and visitors. This immediate community accelerator becomes observable in larger urban centers, given the interconnections with cultural stakeholders (e.g., municipal planning departments, heritage authorities, DMOs, museum operators, arts foundations, tourism SMEs, and resident associations) using heritage locations as catalysts for arts, creativity, and entrepreneurship. This is the case for the Al Shindagha and the Al Fahidi (Figure 2) historic districts in Dubai (Sharaf, 2022) and the heritage and museum areas in Abu Dhabi (Figure 3), for instance on Saadiyat island (Valek, 2022). Both images show a contrast between natural and traditional landscapes, on the one hand, and recent construction, on the other. Similarly, the cultural offering in the Heart of Sharjah provides house-museum itineraries, calligraphy workshops, book fairs, galleries, and festival markets that animate public open spaces (Karakus and Hasan, 2023). Even large cities with comparable planning strategies and ambitions exhibit different morphologic realities.



Figure 2. Dubai, Al Fahidi historical neighborhood (copyright The Cool Box Studio / Dubai Department of Economy and Tourism).



Figure 3. Louvre Abu Dhabi, Saadiyat island (copyright Hufton+Crow / Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism).

As for the effects of commodification and end-user consumption, UAE urban heritage narratives reflect Emirati identity, while the major cities are today inhabited largely by expatriate groups and visited by international tourists. The packaging of heritage as consumable experiences for all these different segments is a necessity but may flatten plural histories and consequently affect their perceived authenticity (Frymoyer, 2023; Seraphim and Haq, 2020). Old city centers in particular can be blended with amenities catering for modern consumers and residents, hence their usefulness to the cultural tourism industry. While the connection between urban heritage tangibles, communities, and development is a commonly accepted equation, it is not a linear one and outcomes may vary significantly. A comparative study on different UAE heritage districts (Awad et al., 2022) showed that their

Common tourism attractiveness was based on tradition, history, and uniqueness, as would be expected, and pointed to the importance of reusing sites and buildings for tourism. A major shared challenge in managing these UAE city centers, however, consists of avoiding their museumification and the subsequent disengagement of residents (Boussaa et al., 2023). Another potential consequence may be placing certain heritage products excessively at the service of tourists, to the detriment of local cultural identities, during the process of fast-paced urbanization (Zaidan and Abulibdeh, 2021). Within local tourism distribution systems (airlines, hospitality, events), heritage attractions function as anchors for city itineraries, providing touchpoints for cross-selling products and services. This has been successfully applied in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, where diversifying stakeholder connections and repackaging heritage products has led to a more robust tourism mix (Haq, Yasin, and Nair, 2023). Against this backdrop, several urban elements are expressions of late modern or contemporary heritage and do not necessarily concentrate inside historic centers but would still allow for adaptive reuse as peripheral standalone buildings (Sosa and Ahmad, 2021), a common urban feature (Cudicio and Bassols i Gardella, 2024). In other cases, retrofitted forts (De Man and Tavares, 2023) such as Al Jahli in Al Ain (Figure 4) and newly built museum districts (Wakefield, 2020) represent independent heritage interfaces, both as architectural creations and as exhibition venues.



Figure 4. Al Ain, Al Jahli fort (copyright Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism).

Branding

Separate emirates rely on these and other ingredients for their destination branding, which is becoming increasingly differentiated and competitive, although an excessive dependence on heritage tourism may ultimately become counterproductive for UAE tourism (De Man, 2023). While a single UAE-wide percentage is unavailable, proxy indicators (museum attendance, guided heritage tour sales, and DMO program participation) reflect an increasing heritage engagement, particularly in Dubai's historic districts, Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat island, and Sharjah's cultural neighborhood (Valek, 2022; Sharaf, 2022). From the supply

side, Destination Management Organizations operating in the UAE (Upadhyia and Vij, 2020), as well as entrepreneurial players (Papadopoulou, 2022) have been creating independent brand equity for cities. In other words, they provide a cumulative value of unique heritage narratives, perceived authenticity, and cultural infrastructure that increases visit intention and price tolerance (Kumail et al., 2022). DMOs in the UAE are public or quasi-public, while the state coordinates brand architecture and regulates heritage site use (Upadhyia and Vij, 2020; Wakefield, 2020). Positive preconceptions of desert and luxury offerings are firmly connected with the uniqueness of Emirati heritage, hence tourism potential in deepening storytelling and scaling adaptive reuse to widen the variety of heritage experiences beyond only a few sites (Michael, Reisinger and Hayes, 2019). Indeed, estimated consumer response indicates these branded constructs have a considerable implication on the tourists' intention to visit the UAE (Kumail et al., 2022). Images of the many cities in the seven emirates are, as expected, properly dimensioned and very distinctive (Schwaighofer, 2014). More in detail, differentiation becomes visible as Dubai is perceived as a more beach-going, pop-cultured, and action-oriented destination as opposed to Abu Dhabi, understood as providing a more culturally enriching experience to a traveler (Williams, 2022). Other cities, dependent either on low-density domestic tourism (denoting weekend visitation distributed across coastal settlements and oasis towns) or on freeriding on Dubai and Abu Dhabi, are necessarily branded in some narrow-angle specificity. Al Ain is correctly pictured as an inland desert city with UNESCO-classified archaeological heritage and natural landscapes (De Man, 2020). In Ras Al Khaimah, pressures include shoreline and road development encroaching on historic clusters, which complicate buffer enforcement but also spotlight heritage as a differentiator in a mountains sea brand (Hilal et al., 2015; Bualhamam, 2009). The city of Sharjah, while considered to lay in a northern Emirate, is adjacent to Dubai and branded as a cultural capital of the UAE (Madichie and Madichie, 2013). The emirate includes three enclave cities on the east coast, namely Khor Fakkan, Dibba Al Hisn, and Kalba, which, together with the urban agglomerations of the emirate of Fujairah (forts, mosques, coastal archaeology, and east coast cultural landscapes; see Vij and Verma, 2016), are branded as offering low-density domestic alternatives to the mainstream Arabian Gulf destinations. Heritage tourism branding can be explored in multiple synergies with archaeology and other tangibles; the selling point being a perception of authenticity (De Man, 2018). About this concept, the sociocultural effect of rapid urban changes has not been well defined and is sometimes taken as a mere generational indicator, when in fact UAE heritage itself has been severely affected by sudden multicultural impacts on traditional values that are used in destination branding. The very tourism product is being transformed accordingly (Zaidan, Taillon, and Lee, 2016). Recent demographic change, new religious and cultural venues, and international contemporary architecture have expanded what can be considered as heritage. This widening now extends from pre-oil vernacular buildings to modernist landmarks, which has created blended traditional-modern tourism itineraries (Sosa and Ahmad, 2021; Williams, 2022) and form new collective memories at street micro-level (HaghighatBinl, Saghafi Moghaddam and Nijhuis, 2024).

Administration

From a material perspective, city planning in the UAE is presently the combined result of straightforward land reclamation for construction and forms of everyday urbanism. The latter includes informal shading, retail, and seating in sikkas, through which residents create micro-scaled neighborhood transformations (Alawadi et al., 2024). Both dynamics po-

tentially generate direct or induced pressure on archaeological sites and historical areas in general. As expected and indicated above, the particulars of each emirate configure unique habitats preventing standard solutions for urban developers. Clear examples of traditional neighborhoods and landmark areas undergoing pressure are indeed observable across the emirates (Boudiaf et al., 2020; Kyriazis et al., 2022) and fit a regional urban strategy that seeks to acknowledge the cultural identity of cities across the Arabian Gulf. Regionally, this occurs through the use of consensual design codes on vernacular typologies, heritage impact assessments, and public funding of cultural urban spaces to stage narratives (Kyriazis et al., 2022; Labadi et al., 2021).

This increasingly complex reality has been addressed by specific legislation such as the Abu Dhabi Cultural Heritage Law (4/2016), which articulates with Federal Law 11/2017 on Antiquities in the safeguarding of tangible heritage. Articles 22 and 23 of the latter specify that urban planning departments and, by extension, other municipal entities are required to set up buffer zones around archaeological sites, while ensuring their conservation. From an institutional standpoint, much of the associated responsibility falls on the Department of Culture and Tourism and to some extent on the recently created Heritage Authority (Abu Dhabi Law 1/2024), whose mandate includes preserving traditions, heritage, and national identity. Similarly, the government of Dubai created the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority, attributing the emirate's historical and archaeological sites to its responsibility (Law 6/2008, Article 17). The Authority is currently branded as Dubai Culture and in addition to the technical aspects of urban planning also promotes the commodification of heritage elements, including curated house-museums, craft markets, dhow-building demonstrations, seasonal heritage festivals, and storytelling routes linking Al Shindagha and Al Fahidi. This consumer-focused mission is indeed present in all seven emirates, mainly through symbioses between municipal services and Destination Management Organizations. The end users of urban culture are both Emirati residents and international tourists, leading to a coordinated supply of experiential heritage (Seraphim and Haq, 2020), even if considerably staged for ready consumption.

For these and other (namely ethical) arguments, the safeguarding of UAE urban heritage (Sosa and Ahmad, 2021) is a guiding principle that implicates multiple tangibles operating within a dynamic relationship. Simply put, the city includes retrofitted buildings, public layouts, and waterfront areas, whose conservation status interacts dynamically with cultural heritage programming. Not all structures warrant conservation; significance assessments (historical, social, architectural) need to define which heritage fabric is best documented and interpreted rather than retained in situ (Labadi et al., 2021). This is especially relevant for the changing topographies of contemporary cities, where intricate legal stipulations and social interests may hinder the pursuit of unrestricted academic research. In addition to national classifications, certain UNESCO commitments are excellent for site preservation and tourism but create additional layers of complexity to city planners. For instance, several components of the cultural sites of Al Ain (Al Nuaimi, 2024) are intraurban, as is the case of the multiple oasis areas that have become integrated by connecting residential areas. The wider city is undergoing archaeological research, namely excavation, also conditioned by the recent expansion of private housing (Sheehan et al., 2024) and World Heritage-related buffer zones.

This connects directly with the concept of sustainability in the wider UAE urban landscape when considering that dimensions such as buffer zones, walkability and transit integration, and heat-mitigation design directly support Sustainable Development Goal targets. The UN 2030 Agenda has laid an important emphasis on the development of cities, a concept translated especially through SDG 11 (Kellison, 2022; Yamasaki and Yamada, 2022) on the development of urban growth and correlated issues such as sprawl, pollution, and population density. Many other SDGs are interconnected with heritage tourism; for instance, SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth and SDG 9 on industry, innovation, and infrastructure (Buhalis et al., 2023; Labadi et al., 2021). The community-based dimension (Abreu, Walkowski, and Perinotto, 2024) is fundamental to tourism quality. Even prior to the Expo 2020 in Dubai, to which the SDGs represented a central framework, the UAE had been insisting on implementing practices that rationalize urbanization through knowledge (of urban metabolism, mobility patterns, micro-climate, and heritage significance inventories that inform smart-city decision-making; see Almulhim et al., 2022) while constructing smart and sustainable city infrastructures (Saleh, Hilal, and Haggag, 2022). From this specific angle, the links between UAE hospitality and cultural tourism are seen as a product of smart cities where commodified heritage serves as an economic driver. Examples include ticketed fort museum circuits, paid cultural festivals in historic districts, bundled museum passes on Saadiyat, and heritage themed hotel packages that channel spending to cultural operators (Valek, 2022; De Man, 2025). Some hyperreal urban components do provide marketable meanings in UAE tourism (Sai Viswanathan and Miller, 2023) but they only exist and perform in a context of sustainable cultural backgrounds. Iconic ultra artifacts (mega malls, observation decks) gain meaning through curated links to local narratives, without which they risk placelessness.

Impacts

As for the indirect and induced impacts of heritage tourism, some economic variables made available by the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre (fcsc.gov.ae) at the time of this publication can partially serve as proxies for illustrating city growth and cultural tourism dynamics. Long-term data series for the last decade show steadily increasing GDP, population, transport, tourism, and museum visits, as well as construction activity. According to the World Bank (databank.worldbank.org), the UAE urban population has an annual growth rate of 4.2% but this peaked around the year 2000 and is currently much lower. Variations at the city level fluctuate continuously, given the very dynamic UAE real estate industry, but the development of residential areas in peripheral or extra-urban areas is an increasing recent trend, not only in large metropolises such as Abu Dhabi and Dubai. However, while GDP growth, museum visits, construction, and cultural heritage tourism are taken together, these associations do not clearly demonstrate causality and are merely observed in some type of articulation. Overall economic benefits of urban tourism are, however, acknowledged by expatriates and Emirati citizens alike as a key non-oil alternative (Dutt, Harvey, and Shaw, 2023). The UAE leisure and entertainment industry has by now reached levels of maturity built on a convergence of hospitality and theme parks, on the one hand, and arts and culture, on the other. Investment in the latter requires fundamental attention to creativity and funding and this rarely yields direct impacts. Even with diffuse impacts, cultural investment shapes perceptions of heritage by expanding interpretive capacity, increasing media visibility, and normalizing repeat visitation, which in turn supports broader urban competitiveness (Bodolica, Spraggon and Saleh, 2020).

Additional caveats are in order because, as has been observed for long in Abu Dhabi and elsewhere, urban tourism is not always a cost-effective multiplier (Sharpley, 2002), especially in a scenario of structural state intervention and public-private rigidity (Seraphim and Haq, 2019). Notwithstanding these challenges, the UAE has by now reached the highest economic diversification ratios among the GCC countries (Shadab, 2023). Despite this competitive advantage, market indicators (Michael, Reisinger, and Hayes, 2019) confirm that UAE urban tourism attractiveness can still be leveraged through destination resource enhancement, explicitly in the cultural sector, and that sustainable growth is to be achieved by tourism products showcasing local built heritage. Another study (Reisinger, Michael, and Hayes, 2019) reaches similar conclusions; the critical factor is destination infrastructure and resources, and it therefore suggests a wider variety of heritage tourism attractions in the UAE.

Conclusion

The rationale behind this paper can be summarized by acknowledging both the systemic nature and specificity of current UAE tourism potential in relation to urban development. Most arguments identified in the literature take for granted the need for tangible elements during the transformation of the urban fabric. No mechanism for doing so exists, however, given the contextual nature of each situation. Another common premise is that of the fairness of heritage-structured tourism offerings, yet this may be challenged as well, for the same reason. What can be used as a baseline principle in any related decision is the equation between urban sustainability, heritage conservation, and tourism quality.

Implications of the scenario outlined above are manifold yet may be grouped into two categories. The first one relates to technical planning and the options for manipulating heritage tangibles inside living cities. This is a multidisciplinary task that requires input from several municipal and private stakeholders. A second group of questions deals with the economic impacts of urban heritage management, which should be aligned with engineering practice and, ideally, should stimulate tourism competitiveness in any urban development for the United Arab Emirates. Both heritage and infrastructural investment remain at the core of national strategic plans, which are heavily city-based, with the exception of a few peri-urban sites and cultural landscapes. This review paper is to be taken as a working document that aims at the development of further comparative research.

This overview of the UAE landscape validates that urban heritage can support tourism-led development. Governance enablers (legal instruments, funding mechanisms, administrative players) and market interfaces (branding, supply chains, cultural programming) can utilize heritage resources for improving livability, visitor value, and conservation, as synthesized in Figure 1. Given the context-specific nature of heritage, this is translated according to the different emirate geographies, demographic realities, and market positions. The successful outcomes of federal and emirate-level planning depend on swift conservation and retrofitting delivery, followed by downstream resident and visitor uses. Two key priorities require sustainable investment. First, the technical factors underpinning scalable adaptive reuse standards; second, the economic ones, ensuring a diversified revenue model that avoids disconnects from both the community and tourism stakeholders.

Future work is expected to refine the analytical lens and avoid over-generalizations about very heterogeneous emirates. The paper takes the adaptive reuse of historic fabric as a controllable dimension, as different public entities apply the same governance framework and

yield distinct results. The government-led dynamics of UAE tourism development accelerate heritage integration and allow for cohesive risk management. Comparative research can build on this paper to explore impacts at either the city or the international scale.

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