

Al Ain: the foundations of authentic place branding

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ABSTRACT

How can the knowledge inherent within a local community be harnessed for the future development of a city? Is this even important?

Place Partners recent work in the regional city of Al Ain, United Arab Emirates, illustrates that place making can provide an authentic image for a city that can compete with global cities to attract new residents and tourists.

Katrina will share her experiences on the Al Ain project and discuss how place making can be utilised to develop place brands that reflect the community's values and aspirations.

The processes for an entire city can also be applied at main street or town centre scale. The opportunity exists for engagement with the community and deep understanding of the stories of a place to provide the foundations for ongoing authentic development.

KEYWORDS: place making, place brands, city image

It is a pleasure to be here today to talk to you about a project that I have been fortunate enough to be involved with for a large part of this year, the Al Ain City Image Management Strategy, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It was a first for us, Place Partners, as place makers, to be invited to join a team looking at what is essentially a city branding strategy, but it soon became very clear that the role of place making and place making processes were crucial in the process of identifying city image. People might normally associate place making with quick win community events or community building activities. At a citywide scale, place making processes and engagement with community becomes much more about uncovering the essence of a place, to be able to project and market that identity, that essence. It is how this essence, the genius loci, is revealed that I would particularly like to focus on today. I will be talking about the value of community engagement in place making - how it helps us in our processes to harness the inherent knowledge of place to be used to develop an authentic response. I will be looking at the primary modes we use to engage with the community, and using as a case study the city image management strategy for Al Ain. The outcomes of the early stages of this project reveal how influential community engagement and the stories of the local residents have been in the shaping of its future city image.

So how does community engagement assist our place making work? Most people would consider community engagement as a requirement for any development, and would have had varied experiences in town and community halls the country over. There are many known methods of community engagement, and different ways of engaging individual's vs. the group vs. the community. There are no hard and fast rules about specific engagement methods over others. Methods will also depend on a number of factors, for example, the needs of the engagement, the level of facilitation required, the projects budgets and the costs associated etc. Different techniques of course will be better for informing, consulting or active participation, than others.

As place makers we use specific forms of engagement because they work for our specific needs for any given project. We are usually trying to find out what makes a community tick and what their stories are, to uncover the genius loci. Genius loci, or spirit of place, is one of the main focuses of Place Partners work - to reveal and respond to the genius loci that gives each project the potential to be both truly unique as well as authentic to its location and community. We believe this point of difference provides the guiding principles for all project decisions, driving design, marketing and management. Genius loci is at the core of the authenticity of a place, and which is what we are all trying to achieve to make our places, streets, cities, stand out from the crowd.

We use community engagement in this uncovering process. We look to specifically targeting the residents or wider community, depending on the scale of a project, through face-to-face surveys, one-on-one interviews and focus groups. Our process prefers the individual story to build understanding of the community story, however, small scaled engagement such as focus groups are also wonderful at allowing small groups of people to brainstorm ideas at the same time as letting individuals be heard. Larger community meetings also have their place in the process and are instrumental particularly in community building. They aid the building process with the networking benefits that come with many people in the same place with a common

goal. Sharing experiences, resources, and knowledge also brings with it enthusiasm and a sense of endless possibility.

There are many examples and success stories of community engagement and place making, Australia and the world over. Many examples and not enough time today to be looking at them all. The point to be made about the success stories is that the process is always the same regardless of the project scale. The jargonistic titles given to projects might be off-putting - the bigger the project the more we seem to enter into the territory of 'marketing speak'. The example I want to tell today has a very jargonistic title - the Al Ain City Image Management Strategy. This project is essentially a branding exercise. Don't think of this as a negative. Isn't this what we all want to do when we look to make our own residential streets, main streets, our own town centres, look better, and function better? Be better for everyone. Be the best they can be. We want to be communicating to the world the value of our places, because we value them.

Who here had even heard of the city of Al Ain before reading the 2009 ICTC program? It could be assumed not many at all. The project is an initiative of the local Council, the Al Ain Municipality, and its aim was to develop a framework to shape future implementation processes and guide the management and maintenance of Al Ain as the 'Oasis City' of the UAE. Place Partners are completing work on this project as we speak with a team of specialist consultancies, led by Roberts Day. The outcomes of the project are to be:

- The enhancement of the city's perception and image, which is to be underpinned by authentic and sustainable experiences and enterprises
A thorough understanding of the scale of the 'image of Al Ain' and its relationship to the existing and future prosperity of the city
- And a critical tool for 'moving forward' for Al Ain, one that shall enable the city to understand, evaluate, direct and control its future.

City image as a term indicates a scale and importance of a project that is indicative of its ambitions. As referred to in Adam Smith's, "*The Re-imagining of Barcelona*"ⁱ, the city image concept also uses the terms place, or destination, marketing, and city branding as a descriptor. As defined in that article, "city image looks to represent or reconfigure a city's image to accrue economic, cultural and political capital". Using this definition, put simply, Al Ain would like to reposition itself, rebrand itself, in the world and is looking intelligently towards a long-term strategy that will not only satisfy the needs of the resident population, but also attract new audiences and long term and sustainable growth as a city.

Place Partners component was to specifically investigate the physical, social and cultural identities of the city to uncover the unique and authentic character of the city, to guide development of a 'place appropriate' framework for the evolution of the city. This represents a shift in thinking particularly new for this region of the world, that analysis of place and what makes a place authentic is actually important, not only for the existing residents of the city, their care and well being, but also to be used as a guide to attracting and marketing to new people, tourists and residents alike, as well as re-positioning the city within global thinking and acknowledgment.

Al Ain is the second (and little known) city of Abu Dhabi Emirate and is the capital

and administrative city of the Eastern Region of the Emirate. It is located under two hours drive east of Abu Dhabi city, equidistant from Dubai city to the north, and lies directly adjacent to the border with the Sultanate of Oman and the city of Buraimi. It is the fourth largest city in the UAE with a population of approximately 450,000. The population is made up of c.30% Emirati citizens, 12% Arab expatriates, 3% other expatriates and 55% guest workers. The main employment sectors are agriculture, education, health and government.

We had expectations of Al Ain, based on its neighbouring cities that were completely unfounded. We arrived to a sleepy country town, a green oasis city, with no building over 5 stories high, wonderfully hospitable people and an inordinate number of roundabouts with themed and different sculptures on every one. We found a place that has a continuous settled history of over 5000 years, burial tombs and other evidence of settlement from 3000BC, and an underground irrigation system that predates the pyramids in Egypt. Now I go back to my original question – who had even heard of Al Ain before ICTC and this presentation? Rest assured you are not alone. The Al Ain settlement sits in the top 10 oldest continuously settled places in the world. It can count among its peer's ancient cities such as Byblos, Damascus, Jericho and Varanasi. What a remarkable asset and marketing tool in this era of tourism and authentic place development. We found 19 of the 20 heritage buildings within Abu Dhabi Emirate that are older than 50 years. We did not find much information about these buildings, any great map to help us get around the city or a taxi driver who knew the city at all, because they had been in Al Ain for a shorter period of time than us.

To engage with the community we used the following methods: face-to-face surveys, an online survey, one-on-one interviews and focus groups. The social research was most telling about what the residents and visitors alike truly desired for their city. A remarkable result was achieved by engaging with the community through an online survey. 500 surveys were aimed for, and 778 were actually gathered. A further 100 face-to-face brought that number up to 878. This result strongly supports our belief that the community and stakeholders wish to know about and be engaged in any future development of their city. Respondents were from a wide range of cultural and ethnic groups, ages and also varied on the length of time they either lived in Al Ain or, how often they visited Al Ain. The online survey was important for a project of this scale to particularly access the residents of Abu Dhabi City as many have second homes and family in Al Ain. I would also suggest that given how hot it was getting at the start of summer, we were not going to be able to access many people on the street for a 15 min face-to-face survey during working hours. While the surveys provide excellent quantitative (tangible) data with some qualitative (intangible) open answered 'aspirational' questions, focus groups aim is to capture the dynamics of people together as well as their individual thoughts. Often information that may be lost or dormant can, in the presence of debate or the inspiration of others, arise and be captured. A mixture of quantitative and qualitative data is also collected.

The one-on-one interviews gave us incredible access to some of the city's experts and highly respected community members in areas representing, but not limited to: agriculture, history, heritage and environment. Seventeen interviews were organized, allowing one-on-one capturing of information from a targeted informant to deliver balanced information for the place making process which might include: past and present stories sharing the individual's values about the city, specific historical

information regarding Al Ain, the identification of further resources, and any ideas for future growth and development. Representatives were pleased to have been sought out and interested in having their opinions heard. They all clearly value the city and appreciated the opportunity to have input in any future directions the city takes.

One such interview subject was the Director of the Zayed Centre for Heritage and History, Hasan M. Al Naboodah. Wonderfully giving of information and even the unwritten history of the UAE and some insight into the politics and workings of the Emirates. In all my reading I had no idea that the late great Sheikh Zayed had actually been married 18 times. That is not written in the history books. According to Muslim law, only 4 wives are allowed at one time, and only if they can all be kept at the same standard and at a level to which they are accustomed. Sheikh Zayed married into every tribe in the area to unite them, divorcing the wives when he reached his quota and marrying into new tribes. I also did not know that Sheikh Zayed's father and 3 uncles had all killed each other to gain power and control of the Emirate. Hasan was born in Sharjah, and live right on the coast. He showed me a photo taken by Wilfred Thesiger, who recorded the changing times of the Arabian Peninsula through his travelogue *Arabian Sands*, taken right outside his house, showing the unloading of slaves, other trade, camels and the flurry of a dock that could have been taken 200 years ago. This was taken in the early 1960s. The massive change these people have seen in their lifetimes and are assimilating with is extraordinary.

Another interview subject was Hamad Saif Al Shamisi. He was the director of Al Ain branch of The Red Crescent (Red Cross). Conducting an interview with an Emirati Man who cannot speak any English is very interesting! Ten minutes of Arabic was being translated into one sentence, of about ten words, by three women completely covered in the black hijab. It was a surprising experience to say the least. One hour is up and Hamad promptly stands up and invites me to lunch, which I promptly accepted. As a Westerner, getting into an Emirati house is like winning the cultural lotto. The journey to the house was interesting with no common language. We get to the family compound and he leaves me in the very capable hands of his wife, and ten children. She can fortunately speak some English. We are having lunch and I am being fed large quantities of food and drinks, coffee and dates. Then I receive the very traditional Emirati 'women's business' guest treatment, with perfume in the hair and clothes, and being given headscarves and perfume. Four hrs later I am trying to leave and still getting invitations to the farm to have an evening picnic with the family and pat the camel.

There were many experiences such as these. Why are these stories and experiences even important to the process? As place makers we rely on the community to let us get into their heads and understand their 'place' to be able to guide the development to its most authentic outcome. These experiences helped us to realise how inherent the culture was within the fabric of the city and the day-to-day activities of the people. As examples, the intangible asset of the tradition of Bedu hospitality plays an important role, not only in the cultural sensibility, but also in how all buildings are designed. Likewise proximity to the desert and nature, is highly valued by the residents, both local and expatriate. Many wished for views through the city edges to the desert to remind them of their past and their story. These stories would not have been uncovered without the crucial feedback given through the social research component of the work.

These research methods guided the following learning's about Al Ain:

- Al Ain has an ancient history of meaningful connection between people and their environment (social research quote)
- Al Ain has an excellent asset base of destinations and places (place audit map)
- Al Ain is not a good communicator (place audit images)
- Al Ain is a city for relaxation and recreation; safe, friendly and family oriented (social research quote)

Opportunities that exist

- Al Ain's identity today is closely connected to its history.
- It is considered a traditional place with a rich history that is highly valued by both locals and visitors.
- The people are open to change and to finding the right balance between the traditional and the modern – they desire to find a way to be modern that is not western, that protects the authentic culture of the city with its active and working oases, but provides them with the amenity of a contemporary city

Throughout our research we found this common theme – there are many places to go but they are hard to find, there is little information, or people have stopped going there because of lack of maintenance or poor quality amenities such as portable toilets. The community loves many of these places and would be happy to go there if they were simply kept clean and updated. The community has shared with us that they also want more things to do and to have more access to information about those events and activities that are happening. This could easily be rectified with a monthly program of events for children, youths and adults, updated tourist maps, clear signage to tourist information centres and integration of the city's major assets into the day to day lives of its citizens through adaptive reuse of heritage buildings. In fact many residents spoke of their desire to see more architecture being built that reflected the local extant architecture, with the comfort of modern facilities.

So you can see how this information starts to translate into useful guidelines on how we can develop the city to its most authentic outcome. We now have knowledge of desired architectural styles, we understand the inherent need for access to nature, we know that the residents love being outdoors, sitting outside their front doors at night to communicate with their families and neighbours, we know they love the low rise scale of development and the city represents distance and difference from its chaotic neighbouring cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. We can identify priority projects around its marketing strategy that will have immediate results on the ease at which tourists can access the cities many assets.

From all of this research came four main themes and their underlying principles. The main purpose of the image enhancing themes is to provide direction in respect to the experiences of the city that the Al Ain Municipality wishes to generate, enhance and communicate. City image management will be the practical tool that determines and evaluates how these themes become visible in physical Al Ain through planning of the built environment, infrastructure and landscaping. This is still a work in progress, thus, I cannot share with you today any defined outcomes of the project. However, in summary, the Themes and Principles can be defined as:

Al Ain, Ancient and Authentic

- The natural and physical heritage of Al Ain, both ancient and modern, is defended, honoured and actively managed
- Al Ain is a living representation its historic and cultural traditions both tangible and intangible
- Islamic and Arabic wisdom is the foundation of the urban structure of the modern city

Al Ain Contemporary Oasis

- The city is for people, it is human scale, green, cool and walkable – a ‘city in an oasis’
- The integrity of the natural landscape; the dunes, wadis, gravel planes, Jebel Hafeet and the oases, is protected and celebrated
- Al Ain provides modern urban convenience in balance with its natural assets and resources

Al Ain, Sanctuary City

- Al Ain is a uniquely Emirati city with a focus on communities, family living and passive recreation in nature
- The city is easy to get around and to understand, making it feel safe and welcoming to all
- Al Ain provides physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual sustenance to all who value its quiet way of life

Al Ain, City of Knowledge and Learning

- Al Ain to protect and advance its living connections with its founding culture, traditions and history through ever-greater initiatives in knowledge and learning
- The Al Ain quality of life (ancient, contemporary, sanctuary) is an attractor for economic development and investment in youth and learning
- Centres of education and research ‘excellence’ to be integrated into the urban fabric of Al Ain and promote the abiding culture

Place making tools, such as community engagement, can be used for a project of this scale or a project on the scale of a main street development, town centre, or even company headquarters. The process will still be the same and ultimately the intention is still the same: ask the people who use the place what they need and desire, develop strategies, both short and long-term, to revitalise and ‘rebrand’ the place - making it better for those people, build social, economic, environmental and cultural sustainability into the place, and attract new audiences to continue the growth and success of a place and build new stories for generation’s to come.

What we do not see in projects such as this in Al Ain is any attempt at capacity building in place making; attempts to have the community take ownership of their public space and take the lead in its development. This is understandable given they have fast-tracked hundreds of years of built environment history and experience into 40-50 years and the concept of place making is still very new. Elsewhere the place making movement has been building over the same period of time the UAE has actually seen modern development. Australia is now in a position, and still a relatively new nation in the scheme of things, but its people have started the process of building their own public spaces, rather than waiting for their local and State Governments to action change.

While we use methods of community engagement to gain specific insights into a community for specific project based intentions, such as a city image, the benefits can manifest themselves in many other positive ways. The Al Ain project and likewise many local projects have shown us that people love to talk about their place and feel very strongly about it. While we learn from individual experiences to uncover the authentic essence of a place, the *genius loci*, we are also building trust within the community for a development process, and an understanding amongst themselves that there are many ways to build community and as individuals they have more power than they believe. This is place making to not only make better public spaces but also for community building. The process and the questions are simply put: look at place with an outsider's perspective and insider knowledge, analyse how people use that place, and why, and what makes it theirs, and what makes it interesting to them, and why they keep coming back. These questions and motivations drive and shape any place development project and are questions that we as place makers are most interested in. Consulting the people with inherent knowledge of place, will only benefit a development, a city image, or a branding strategy, by infusing the authentic place essence into every considered element, thus creating a unique residence, or community or tourist destination, now and in the future.

REFERENCES

ⁱ Smith, Andrew (2005) *Conceptualizing City Image Change: The 'Re-imaging' of Barcelona* in *Tourism Geographies*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 398-423