Urban Planning
2024 • Volume 9 • Article 7775
https://doi.org/10.17645/up.7775

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Domesticity as Nation Building in the United Arab Emirates

Sophie A. Johnson

School of Interior Design, Canadian University Dubai, UAE

Correspondence: Sophie A. Johnson (sophie@cud.ac.ae)

Submitted: 30 October 2023 **Accepted:** 9 January 2024 **Published:** 7 March 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Housing Norms and Standards: The Design of Everyday Life" edited by Sam Jacoby (Royal College of Art) and Seyithan Özer (Royal College of Art), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/up.i316

Abstract

The legacy passed on from one generation to another has deep connections to a shared identity, a sense of belonging, and cultural heritage. Different types of architecture reflect cultural and societal changes, especially housing. In the UAE, housing has played an important role in nation-building efforts, with the Emirati villa, a space filled with intangible practices through which domestic cultural production and national identity can be read. Therefore, the transformation of domesticity has been instrumental in the process of rapid Emiratisation and nation-building. This article discusses the tangible and intangible aspects of domesticity and hospitality found in the Emirati villa using conventional architectural analysis and live experience studies. By presenting what guides and informs domestic practices, one can read the interior space as a series of spatial qualities. It asks: How have Emirati homes become a means to create and preserve shared social practices? This aims to reveal how social practices, such as hospitality, are spatialised in Emirati homes, capturing everyday life and social norms. The article argues for the recognition of domestic cultural transformations as a valuable contribution to Emirati national identity over the last 50 years of nation-building.

Keywords

cultural heritage; domesticity; housing; nation-building; space production; United Arab Emirates

1. Introduction

The theorist Raymond Williams (1958) in his book *Culture is Ordinary* described culture as the pursuit of the spiritual rather than the material, highlighting that culture is *ordinary* and an ongoing process. Many types of architecture reflect cultural and societal changes. Housing, especially, has always been directly affected by external forces such as politics and economics, while also capturing everyday life. Homes can be considered the containers of everyday ordinary practices and wider social norms; over time these practices offer insights into a more collective identity. Thus, homes and the domestic practices within them can be understood as

© 2024 by the author(s), licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

embodying both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Housing occupies a central social and political role in society by being considered the most important social welfare pillar and often a central means of ensuring political allegiance.

Reflecting on this relationship between social practices, identity, and political instrumentalisation, this article studies notions of the home and domesticity in the UAE by considering the socio-cultural characteristics and lifestyles of inhabitants. This is done in the context of new independence and oil discovery, which brought the idea of the *nation*, national heritage, and identity to the forefront of government consciousness in the 1970s. In particular, this article focuses on the Emirati villa typology as the concern and subject of nation-building in the UAE. The villa typology from the 1970s is defined as a stand-alone, one- or two-story building enclosed by a high wall defining the plot.

Anderson (1983) in *Imagined Communities* discusses a sense of *them* and *us*, when in the process of determining who is included and not, a sense of belonging is established. In the case of the UAE, this sense of belonging appeared difficult at the time of the union, in 1971. Tribal affiliation was strong in the 1970s and the new UAE had limited appeal to the deeply rooted belonging of the tribes. Sabban (2018) called this a *twin identity* and Rashid et al. (2022) go further to describe this identity as being socially anchored in tribal traditions, combined with ultra-modern construction and layout, which led to the UAE nation-building focusing on pure Arabness and Bedouin heritage. The wealth deriving from oil was invested into large-scale infrastructure and housing projects that visibly represented and spatialised a new national unity. Nation-building in a modern nation-state, like the UAE, is therefore a product of modernisation, social construction, and ideological invention (Litvak, 2009). Especially, the idea of being settled in a place was a new tradition, with the nation-building agenda closely linked to urban planning, and the provision of permanent housing to the Emirati population, which over the last 50 years has transformed and spatialised certain social practices such as hospitality.

Most homes predate *and* outlive the lifespans of their occupants. Consequently, the physical and material surroundings of a home can encapsulate their shared values across generations. The interior environment is key to giving meaning to people's daily and social lives and most of what matters to them often happens behind closed doors in the social space of the private sphere (Miller & Kozu, 2001).

Social space, according to Lefebvre (1974), is where cultural life is enacted, and patterns of social interaction emerge. Massey (1994), in "A Place Called Home," further highlights the pressure that space is under due to globalisation and calls this a phase of "time–space compression." Douglas (1991) refers to the home not as a fixed entity but as a movable space governed by forms of control and rules based on time and space. Therefore, homes embody both familial life and collective norms and practices.

King (1984) contends that relatively little attention has been paid to the domestic interior as an area of cultural production. This view is reiterated by Winton (2013) in "Inhabited Space: Critical Theories and the Domestic Interior." Lefebvre (1974) adds that space is structuring, and both encourages and discourages certain forms of behaviour, and interactions. The formal and social analysis of the interior can therefore reveal patterns of cultural etiquette, identity, and practices. These processes, everyday routines and rituals framed in a time and space are relevant when studying the forming of shared identity and heritage.

The transformation of the home can be considered to mirror the wider transformations of social relations. Yaneva (2012) in the book *Mapping Controversies in Architecture*, divides the world into *cause and effect*—in this instance, cause equals architecture and effect equals society—thus simplifying materiality and meaning. The shape, type, or style of buildings are in this sense deeply embedded in the social context of their time and offer an alternative way of thinking about how buildings emerge socially. Therefore, their analysis is a powerful means to inspect, interpret, and explain socio-spatial meanings.

Currently, there is no systematic documentation of the contemporary villa typology (Rashid et al., 2022), so this article explores the richness of these domestic histories in the UAE using a multi-disciplinary approach. It asks: How have Emirati homes become a means to create and preserve shared social practices? The aim of the article is to reveal how social practices such as hospitality are spatialised in Emirati homes and capture everyday life and social norms. It studies how the process of spatialising intangible practices becomes a more important driver and evidence of shared identity than the physical home itself. This starts to rethink the way interiors are studied by bringing together the analysis of the physical space with the experience of the inhabitant.

1.1. Methodology

To fully understand the significance of the idea of "home," one must overcome familiar academic boundaries (Hollows, 2008). The examination of domesticity and its relation to (in)tangible heritage necessitates diverse methods. This study employs a practice-led framework to reflect on the production of Emirati villas and their spaces. The means of interior design analysis are hereby understood as enabling more than just the study of object arrangements and as also revealing intangible aspects such as aspirations, identities, and experiences. Therefore, besides a formal analysis of housing design, this article explores how the lived experience of a home offers insights into spatial production, intangible heritage, and cultural transformations.

1.1.1. Drawing Analysis

As part of the research, a spatial study of 30 government villas and 30 privately designed villas was conducted to explore how the nation-building agenda is reflected in the design of Emirati villas. Spatial data, including plans, sections, and elevations for the villas, was collected and compared. This was used to analyse the architect's idea and the spatial value of interior spaces and to categorise spatial dimensions related to hospitality, services, and circulation.

A common way of studying the architect's intention and the relationship between design ideas, form, concept, and implementation is through the analysis of drawings, be it a sketch or more technical drawings. Among others, Unwin (1997) has presented strategies for using drawing in architectural analysis. Clark and Pause's (1985) studies of drawings focus on spatial order, while Jenkins (2003) discusses the active engagement of drawings and diagrams in uncovering the experience of architecture. The medium of drawing is widely seen as a "key disciplinary ally for architecture" (Kulper, 2013, p. 59).

Although Evans (1997) considers drawings the language of architecture serving as its main tool for communication, he also questions this by positing that "the transmutation that occurs between drawing and building remains to a large extent, an enigma," and indeed the drawing on its own has significant limitations as "not all things architectural can be arrived at through drawing" (Evans, 1997, p. 159). Nevertheless,

drawings are crucial in the design process, as they allow all parties to understand and evaluate the spatial relationships, dimensions, and visual appearance of a building. Drawings collectively serve as an essential tool to develop and communicate design intent and are a means to represent and test space and its social meanings. In part, this is possible as space, as defined by space standards, has, to some extent, become a measure of our social norms. Space in this sense can demonstrate conscious or subconscious decisions about what and how much space is needed for domestic life, with drawings capturing this process of design thinking and social conventions (Park, 2017).

Residential space standards are well established in the West. One of the best-known space standards is that proposed by the UK Parker Morris Committee (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 1961) in their report *Homes for Today and Tomorrow*, which adopts a functional and analytical approach based on evidence collected through the observation of normal daily activities. However, in the UAE, the urban and social context is very different and to fully understand the intangible aspects of the production of domestic space—the process of interiorisation and spatialisation—some additional layers of questioning are needed.

In this article, drawings are read as a point where visualisation and thinking are fused into a relational and synthetic practice. This thinking can be abstracted from the drawings by analysing zoning, dimensions, functions, hierarchy, and decorations.

1.1.2. Lived Experience

Drawings alone are not enough to capture everyday lived experiences and domestic practices, with everyday meaning transferred or learnt within these spaces (Williams, 1958). The drawing analysis is therefore supported by 10 semi-structured interviews with residents and six within the design community to better understand the cultural practices that take place in homes. Each interview lasted around 40 minutes and was conducted between 2020 and 2022. The interviews were analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. This helped the identification and organisation of shared themes across the interviews, enabling the analysis of interior space as a series of spatial qualities and how traditions have become spatialised over time. Hereby, hospitality emerged as a key theme of analysis.

The research collected user data in homes in Dubai. Diary methods, combined with other methodologies, have been successfully used across a range of different disciplines (Bolger et al, 2002). To avoid perceptions of intrusion or interrogation, the chosen strategy was a "time and place" diary format, with participants recording activities throughout a 24-hour period. This method connects domestic rituals, activities, and behaviours to a time and place within the home, providing contextual insights into the lived experience of the occupants. It enables a more ethnographical understanding of the spatial qualities and rituals, by uncovering how spaces are actually used, beyond the architect's intentions.

Hospitality studies have traditionally been interdisciplinary in their approach, as scholars pursue diverse aims and objectives. In this study of Emirati housing, hospitality is framed through a heritage perspective to study shifting domestic boundaries and changing codes of etiquette within the home. Through the study of heritage and domestic spatiality, the intangible aspects of homes and hospitality are explored.

2. The Role of Housing in Nation-Building

It has been argued that the oil discovery in the early 1960s and the subsequent wealth distribution among the Emirati population created an authoritarian power structure, with the political or tribal elite controlling all assets (Foley, 1999; Reinisch & Thomas, 2022). This wealth distribution was also closely tied to citizenship, with citizenship policies, often linked to one's tribe, place of birth, or family book, determining the level of financial support a person was entitled to and measuring one's status as an Emirati citizen (Lori, 2013). In essence, citizenship in the UAE is dynamic, distinguishing citizens from expatriates, and it is closely linked to how Emiratis are provided with land to live on and property to live in by the state.

A modest government plot was around 24 × 20 m in the 1960s but has since increased to 31 × 44 m today. Figure 1 shows the plot but also urban density and layout changes between the 1960s to 2020s. The organic typology has been remodelled around a clear road infrastructure, with rows of villas sitting within the plot, not filling it. Initially, homes would typically fill the entire plot. However, the 1980s saw a shift when plot sizes tripled, but the actual size of a home stayed about the same. Over time, this relationship between plot and home size has changed, and the home now fills much of the plot again. The gifting of housing, education, and healthcare is part of a national building programme, meant to re-establish and maintain sovereignty by reinforcing tribal loyalties.

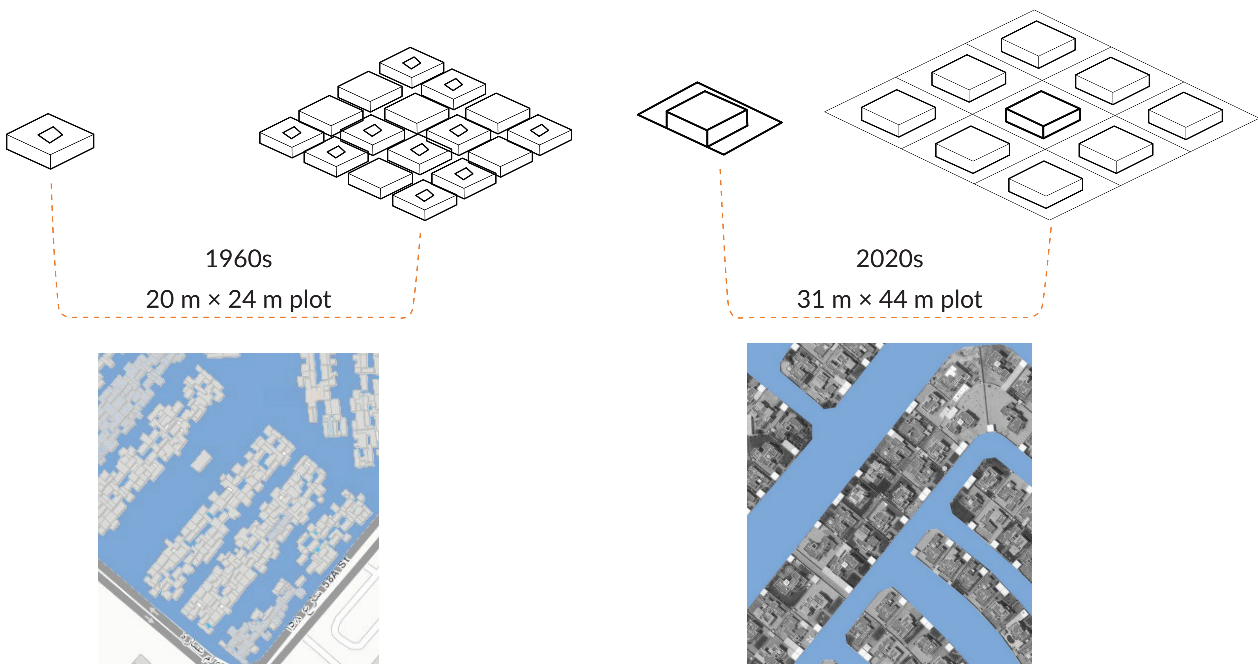

Figure 1. Changing plot sizes and urban layout over 50 years.

As the UAE emerged, so did a more structured nation-building agenda that, amongst others, focused on the provision of housing and the creation of new urban centres. Initially, in the 1960s and 1970s, the notion of better living conditions was used to encourage people from the peripheries to move into more central, urban locations, through the promise of better housing. Later this would be complimented by incentives such as access to healthcare and education.

Citizens started coming from Liwa, the empty quarter, to urban places like Abu Dhabi, where they were offered new housing with water and electricity (Heard-Bey, 1982). This housing was very different to the *arish* housing they were used to. Figure 2 shows an *arish* house. The structure is made from palm branches and trunks, utilising natural wind ventilation. Figure 3 shows a common housing cluster in Dubai in the 1960s, it is a mixture of *arish*, courtyard housing and low-rise modernism. These images highlight development that was already being undertaken before the 1971 union. There is a tendency to dismiss pre-union housing as not worthy of discussion but, by this point, there is already international and local architectural dialogue happening that is vital to understanding its contribution to modernising or remodelling traditional housing.

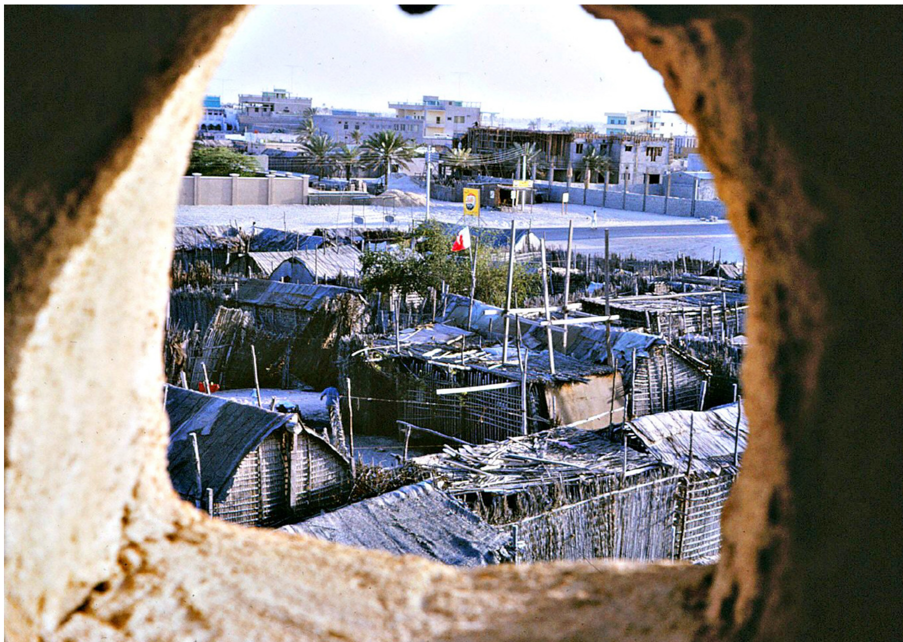

Figure 2. *Arish* community in Dubai, 1960s. Source: Courtesy of Len Chapman.

Figure 3. Housing cluster in Dubai, 1960s. Source: Courtesy of Len Chapman.

New, modern homes were built in the 1970s for a young nation still lacking basic infrastructure. In a bid to settle the nation, Sheikh Zayed further engaged international practices, to design national housing. These attempted to capture existing lifestyles and cultural patterns through a range of layouts and spatial possibilities while embracing up-to-date construction techniques and materials. To entice citizens to settle, they were provided by the government with land to build their homes on or offered subsidised or low-cost housing. This condensed historical timeframe of creating a national identity and infrastructure in the UAE and by default a national identity has meant that the Emirati narrative has always been forward-looking instead of looking back at the past. Without documentation of the past, it is difficult to understand spatial changes and it is essential to understand the heritage and cultural transformations on which shared identities depend.

Since the 1970s, increasing importance has been placed on tradition, heritage, and national identity across the UAE and the Gulf region in an attempt to create social cohesion within a minority local population (Mazzetto, 2018). However, by presenting heritage as a general 'linear, coherent and stable history of, and for, the population" (Erskine-Loftus et al., 2016, p. 1), this transition into modernity has been characterised as an imagined transition.

The concept of "imagined communities and traditions," which is perhaps one of the most cited terms when discussing nationalism or national identity in the region, originated in the 1980s. The first was Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger and their *The Invention of Tradition* and, the second, was Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, both published in 1983. Despite being perceived as something from the past, Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) argues that cultural practices are relatively new and a way to create national identity or unity. Anderson (1983) refers to a nation as a socially constructed community that is developing a national feeling, with the people in a community perceiving themselves as part of a group. This national identity is reinforced by the print and broadcast media through shared images, symbols, and activities that create a sense of collective identity (Hawker et al., 2005).

While academic studies of housing have tended to focus on the local and environmental context and how heritage studies are driven by world heritage policies, adopting a governance top-down perspective, new discussions about the *imagined* and politically driven heritage experiences within the UAE have emerged in more nuanced ways since the 2000s, building on Hobsbawm's and Anderson's work (AlMutawa, 2016; Hawker, 2002; Khalaf, 2002; MacLean, 2021, Prager, 2015). Aligned with this, the article considers an approach through the live experience of housing to expand conventional interior design analysis and study domestic cultural transformations in the UAE.

3. The Invention of a Housing Tradition

Wealth sharing in the UAE is closely tied to patronage and ensuring loyalty among various tribe families. In this context, housing and nation-building programmes are part of a national narrative to create a new sense of shared identity and a new housing tradition. The welfare provision or gifting of land, property, and services still continues today and has resulted in many Emirati neighbourhoods scattered across the UAE (Alawadi, 2018).

The current housing paradigm in the UAE tends to overlook continuities with the pre-oil era and its built-scapes (Rashid et al., 2022), assuming a sharp division between pre- and post-oil housing histories. This

tends to suggest that new developments seemingly rose from the sand in the 1970s and overlooks the role of wealth sharing through housing in creating a cohesive national identity, the influence of international practices in the Emirati villa design, or construction methods that were all formative to housing within the region. This makes it difficult to understand the intrinsic relationships between cultural transformations, spatial changes, and patterns that inform heritage and housing histories.

The lack of more diverse studies and systematic documentation of contemporary housing and its histories has facilitated an "invented" understanding of the past (Anderson, 1983; Bourdieu, 1993; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Rashid et al., 2022)—"invented" in the sense that international impact is not often given enough recognition beyond that of stating Sheikh Zayed's curiosity in the 1980s, even though nation-building programmes were developed by foreign consulates, as in the case with the UAE. Generally, the heritage narrative skips housing, jumping from Bedouin living to today's global setting (Hawker, 2002). The heritage of Emirati housing is often only written about from a traditional perspective, focusing on *arish* housing or natural cooling systems (Alawadi, 2018; Bani Hashim, 2018; Elsheshtawy, 2019; Hawker, 2002; Heard-Bey, 1982), with its interiority, domestic practices, and everyday life not considered having heritage value and therefore remaining largely undocumented.

The region has sought heritage recognition since the late 1970s, when the UAE joined UNESCO, indicating interest in formal heritage management (Silva, 2015). The ongoing debate about what *is* considered heritage value led in 2018 to The Modern Heritage Initiative was introduced to preserve buildings from the 1960s and 1970s, which have contributed to preserving "the memory of the place" (Sosa & Ahmad, 2022). However, housing tends to be dismissed, with neighbourhoods in Deira and more famously Shindagha and Al Fahidi modernised without consideration for its historical relevance (Alhasawi, 2019; Boussaa, 2014), a pattern that continues today. Al Shorta, a neighbourhood of 419 homes built in the late 1980s, was demolished in 2021, without any documentation, to make way for a large speculative development. Earlier in 2018, the first part of this neighbourhood also fell to the same fate; however, it is documented in *Lifescapes Beyond Bigness* (Alawadi, 2018). This demonstrated a lack of recognition in the neighbourhood, housing, and lived experience of a community that had lived and evolved over a 40-year period in Dubai.

Besides government-led heritage agendas, several proponents have presented an alternative perspective of nation-making projects, with the UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale being the most consistent. In 2014, the exhibition *Lest We Forget* (Bambling) created an archive of architectural developments in the UAE of the last century; in 2016, *Transformations: The Emirati National House* (Elsheshtawy) explored how standard housing was being adapted by residents, and, in 2018, *Lifescapes Beyond Bigness* (Alawadi) investigated everyday landscapes outside mega-developments. Each exhibition offered a different perspective and approach to understanding architecture in nation-making projects. Due to the intense development over the last 50 years, it is not surprising that there have been many different approaches to recognise and manage cultural heritage (Golfomitsou & Rico, 2014).

A Western influence on this early development is evident from a footnote by Bristol-Rhys (2009) in *Emirati Historical Narratives*, which states that by the late 1950s, there was increasing resentment about living conditions in the Trucial States, and the British were held accountable for having done little more than helping themselves. However, with the European, American, and Gulf Cooperation Council states all involved in construction projects in the region, the Emirati villa typology was heavily influenced by external

cultural developments. For example, in Dubai, the British Architect John Harris, and in Abu Dhabi, the Egyptian Planner Abdul Rahman Makhlouf, were key figures in developing masterplans.

With the large expat population arriving in the 1980s also arrived the “LA suburban lifestyle,” exemplified by well-known developments such as 100 Villas and Chicago Beach. Figure 4 is 100 Villas (since destroyed) which was an expat community of single-story villas, with pools, greenery, and simple infrastructure. These developments introduced a resort feel with swimming pools, tennis courts, and cafes. They would pave the way for the development of similar small compounds in Jumeirah and Umm Sequim over the next 15 years. At the same time, plots of land were being sold to wealthy merchants to build housing for expats.

Figure 4. Iconic 100 Villas in Dubai, destroyed in 1998. Source: Kareem (2018).

However, this lifestyle was not yet comparable to the majority of the local citizens, who still lived without running water, electricity, or sewage systems. In contrast to expat housing, a diverse architectural landscape, *arish* housing was still very common, connecting community facilities with *sikkas*. However, by the 1980s, courtyard housing and high-rises would widely coexist with the adoption of Western lifestyles and conveniences.

Key studies of national housing were conducted by Al-Mansoori (1997), El-Aswad (1996), Elsheshtawy (2019), and Heard-Bey (1982). Worth mentioning is the Bayt Sha’bi (the national house), which was the result of a low-cost, mass housing initiative. By the 1970s, these mass-produced, simple two-bedroom villas with a kitchen, bathroom, and courtyard were being built by the thousands (Elsheshtawy, 2019). However, they did not meet the cultural needs of the Emiratis, failing to capture local identity and provide suitable spaces for customary practices. Over time, makeshift additions made these homes more suitable to local expectations shaped by gender-specific activities, varied needs for privacy, and different hospitality practices (El-Aswad, 1996).

The early villas built in the 1970s and 1980s had a limited understanding of these culturally important aspects and were largely based on imported housing ideas and lifestyles, though this is not widely acknowledged when discussing the cultural heritage of the UAE. Figure 5 shows a typical government Emirati villa from 1974, demonstrating the "dirty" kitchen outside of the living quarters of the villa. The majlis has its own entry point, to allow male and female privacy, which is valued both culturally and religiously. This spatial understanding has cultural importance valued even from the Bedouin era when there were clear practices happening in spaces.

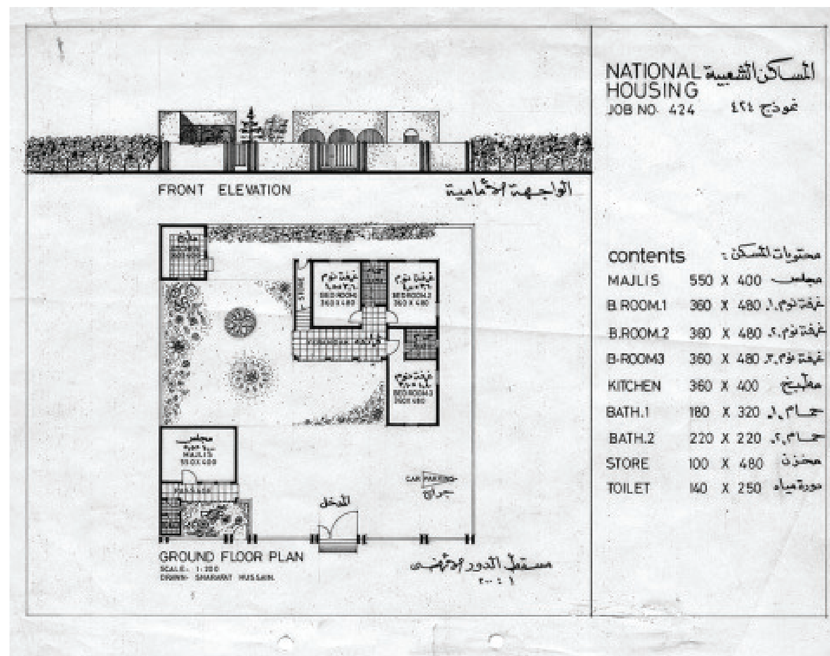

Figure 5. A typical 1974 plan, illustrating the "dirty" kitchen and the majlis accessible from its own entrance. Source: Elsheshtawy (2019, p. 30).

Figure 6 is a typical interior layout of a Bedouin tent. There is interior flexibility; however, it is clear the importance of spatial practices for the users. The family space is tucked away at the back away from the public gaze and the male guest space outside the tent. Many spatial divisions were still apparent in the 1974 plan (Figure 5). The villa typology has become representative of a local way of living: From the 2000s onwards, they have adopted a more familiar layout, demonstrating an international input. Figure 7 shows a typical plan from a government project in 2000. It is from a large neighbourhood in Dubai, that has over 500 villas. This is a standard two-story, three-bedroom, standalone villa that sits centrally in a plot of 30×40 m. The kitchen is now inside the villa, with clear service access to the maids' quarters and back door. The majlis is within the villa but does have its own private entrance. What these samples demonstrate is the Western influence on spatial planning within the Emirati villa. Another way to understand the importance of these spatial developments is through privately designed Emirati villas. This example is one of 500 villas built in 2007 in Basha South in Dubai with two to five bedrooms. Housing policy does allow some transformations within the plot that accommodate a more culturally traditional approach. The privately designed villas in Dubai give an insight into what spaces are important to Emirati. While the plot size most of the time is much larger than in government villas, the relationship between dimensions is still relevant to understanding spatial value.

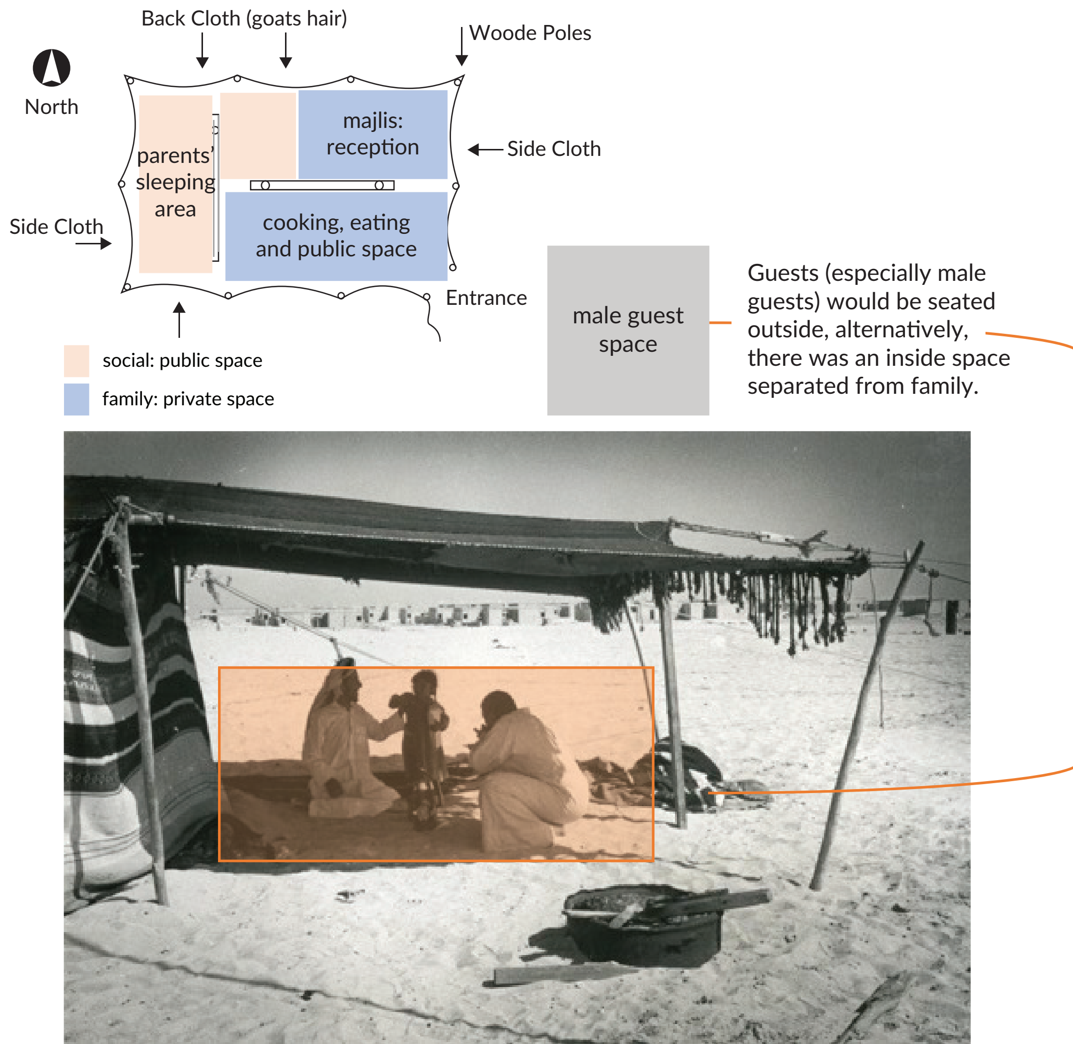

Figure 6. Typical Bedouin layout and spatial arrangements. Source: Courtesy of Catholic Documentation Centre of the Radboud University Nijmegen.

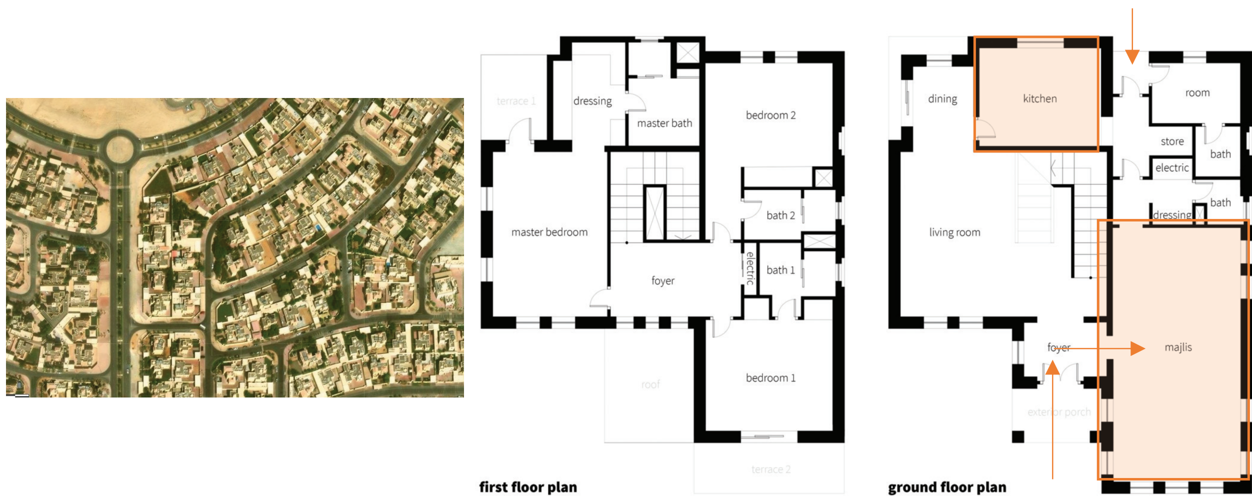

Figure 7. A typical plan from 2000: The kitchen is inside the villa, with service access from the rear of the house and the majlis has a separate entrance from the foyer.

The spatial importance of hospitality is demonstrated through the ground floor. The ground floor has a male majlis, a guest room with an ensuite, a spatially lavish entrance, and a serviced kitchen at the rear. The family space is on the first floor, demonstrating the value given to the management of guests within the domestic sphere, with over a third of the available interior space dedicated to this. While already evident in government housing, in comparison, larger privately designed villas provide an even better understanding of spatial preferences.

This "invented" authenticity prevents acknowledging the foreign influence on interior spatial development and how, over time, it has been negotiated to become part of a national identity. As the notion of heritage is being redefined in the Arab region, it is an interesting time to reconsider the Emirati villa typology as part of a wider architectural dialogue with its local historical past and contemporary presence.

4. Hospitality and the Spatialisation of Intangible Practices

The recognition that housing provides much more than a mere physical shelter and encompasses aspects such as security, privacy, social relations, status, and community is widely acknowledged (Foley, 1999; Smith, 1970). In the UAE, where housing is widely *gifted* to the native population, social status is often expressed through the symbolic materiality found in dramatic villa facades, entrance hallways, and luxurious majlis—all designed for the gaze of visitors. As evident from a historical study of housing (Alawadi, 2018; El-Aswad, 1996; Elsheshtawy, 2019; Rashid et al., 2022), hospitality is a critical concept that can be considered an important form of intangible heritage and part of the nation-building story (Martín, 2021). Hospitality is key to Emirati culture, influencing the management of people and the production of interior space, which is also evident in how this has evolved over time.

Welcoming guests and the associated daily rituals and practices are an essential aspect of many cultures, indeed the very act of the "ethics and politics of welcoming the other" is considered a fundamental part of domestic and social life (La Caze, 2007, p. 67). Brotherton and Wood (2007) understand hospitality from a social science perspective as a form of social control and an act of mediation. Selwyn (2001, p. 19) alludes to the fact that hospitality converts "strangers into familiars, enemies into friends, friends into better friends, outsiders into insiders, non-kin into kin." These aspects of social control are also evident in the various spatialities found within Emirati homes.

Ordinary daily hospitality practices permit social, cultural, ethical, and political discourses to be learnt and passed on from one to the next generation. They are thus vital forms of transmitting intangible heritage and demonstrate the various ways in which people give meaning to their domestic environment and spatialise social relationships. As spaces are intimately related to the self, "these status symbols serve to maintain social order by supporting hierarchical differentiation among people" (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015, p. 17). This is legible in the UAE, where the home is a place in which social values continue to be taught and displayed for others to see, as demonstrated in the *Lest We Forget* UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (Bambling & Tracy, 2014). To Williams (1958), culture is thus observed and understood at every social level of society, with learning occurring in everyday life through experiences of one's home, family life, lifestyles, and so forth. The common meaning created between members of a society *is* what makes a society and its culture—or in this case national identity.

Social values are reflected in the homes people live in and consequently in the way they want them to be designed. In an interview conducted by the author with an interior designer, they stated this when discussing their clients:

> The most important space they are going to spend on, whether they are rich, *yanni* or not, old or young, is the majlis and entrance. People are coming to see those spaces. It is like presenting yourself but through your particular space. The finishes are the most important thing within these spaces.

This is also evident when studying the layout drawings of Emirati villas. Understanding spatial analysis, from both the public and private sectors helps to categorise spatial dimensions, which indicate a value given to different rooms and functions. This suggests, supported by the housing policy of the UAE, a recognition of a more cosmopolitan audience, particularly in the Emirate of Dubai.

Measuring the space of government villas reveals a clear hierarchy of rooms, such as the majlis (predominantly male) and the main entrance or hallway, evident from their size within the overall space. This type of space is intended for guests to experience the home and evidence the social and intergenerational value placed on hospitality practices. However, within the more constrained space of government-provided villas, any specific female space is omitted while male social space is prioritised.

As the interview of a male Emirati national demonstrates, specific rituals and protocols when entering a formal majlis are observed:

> The majlis is designed in a way that he sits in the middle, but then you don't bypass everyone else, you actually say hello to five or six people. You start with the right-hand side and then you make your way through, by saying hello to everyone, then you reach him. You just have to say hello and that's what we do until we reach our great uncle.

These domestic practices and rituals are clearly valued among Emirati nationals and thus have to be understood by designers. An interior designer who was interviewed for this study fully recognised their role in facilitating the importance of the ritual and social status in their design:

> The majlis must have a feature wall, and this feature wall must have a sofa and two chairs. One must enter and see this wall. This is the most important, the oldest man will sit on the sofa. Here, the oldest is the most important. He will sit in the middle of the sofa, and we are all going to sit around. There must be service tables between each of the sofas. They would have coffee, sweets, dates, and delicate cakes for any meeting in the majlis.

The spatial practices of hospitality and the spatial typologies which are designed to support a range of cultural norms, embed a sense of identity and meaning from within. This is confirmed by an interview with an Emirati female:

> In my home, we do have a living room type area and a formal majlis area. In most cases, we would be sitting in the informal living space, as the majlis is designated for more formal guests and events. The formal majlis is quite refined and thus not a space where you can kick your shoes and relax, so to speak. It commands attention but also somehow respect. A mature and wise space.

The cultural importance of domestic space was acknowledged by UNESCO in 2015 when the majlis was included on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Whatever the social status of a resident, the majlis is a space for the transfer of oral heritage and traditions and thus has become recognised as a space that holds cultural value.

There have been various attempts to capture and formalise the essence of home through interior design practice, for example, in the works of Ioannidou (2020) and Sloane (2014). These attempts involve layering different research approaches to capture the tangible and intangible aspects of one's home. A common aspect across these approaches is the study of the interior from sociological, anthropological, and philosophical perspectives, recognising that "people's homes embody and express cultural and lifestyle preferences" (Hanson, 1998, p. 1).

By grouping spaces with similar demands or hierarchal dimensions, the cultural role that hospitality plays within the home becomes clear. Considering the formal majlis, central circulation space, and formal family or female living areas that take up most of a ground floor, especially in privately designed villas, it illustrates how hospitality gives meaning to spatial production.

To relate the lived experience to the spatial analysis, interviews and user diaries were used to understand the rituals or practices that took place in these spaces. They provide an analytical study of the needs of each space and how the people used it, offering a sense of spatial satisfaction. Public space within the villa serves as the setting for hospitality activities, reinforcing hospitality as an important cultural activity. The quote in Figure 8 from an industry representative, illustrates how food preparation has a different social meaning and function, with the "dirty" kitchen provided outside so that the smell of cooking does not enter the visitors' space, once again highlighting the importance of hospitality within spatial production.

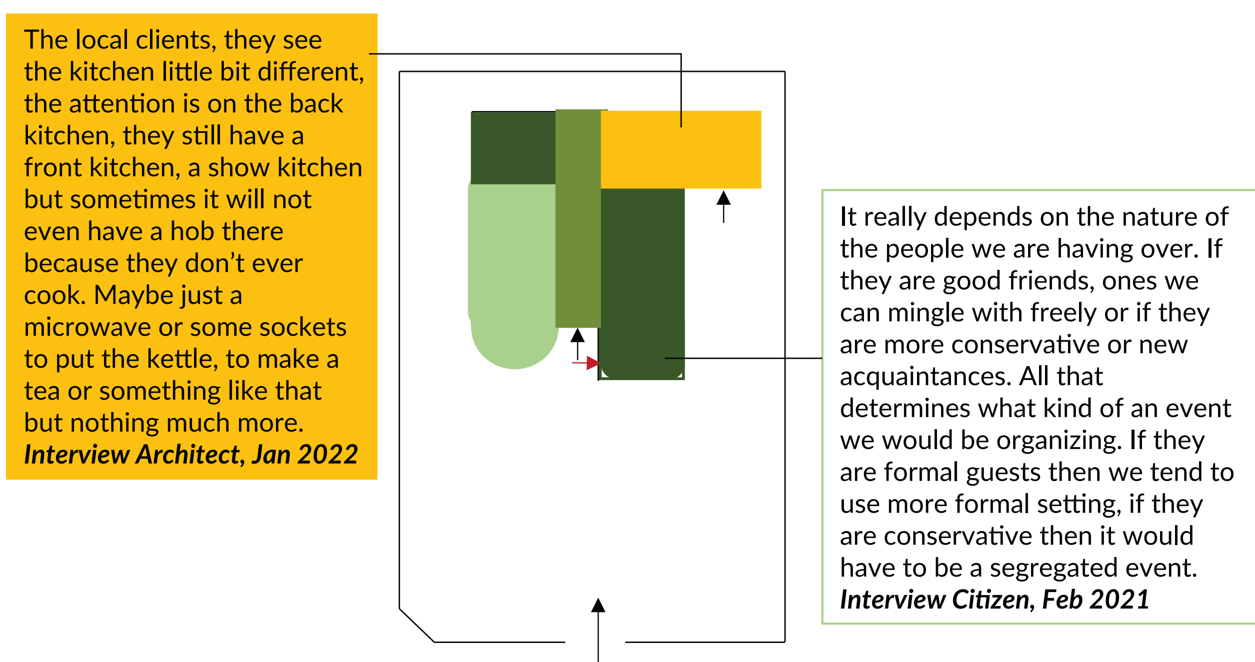

Figure 8. Spatial relationships of a ground floor from a privately designed villa, 2007. The ground floor is primarily reserved for visitors and hospitality rituals.

By considering how spatial production has changed in relation to hospitality rituals and how social status is formed, maintained and binds (tribal) community, national identity is revealed. The second quote in Figure 8 is from an interviewee who touches upon formal rituals around different types of visitors, and how that impacts how the interior spaces are used. These interviews help gain a deeper understanding of how the spaces are understood and how this, at times, might be in conflict with the standardised layout of government villas.

The place and activity records proved to be an effective tool in understanding the daily rituals of space production over a 24-hour period. Figure 9 shows the results from a time, place, and activity diary from a family of seven and a maid. It documents the movements of all the family members within the home, including the maid, indicating what spaces they spend time in and the activities taking place. This example, collected by a young male in his early 20s, specifically shows how the majlis is a space primarily used for

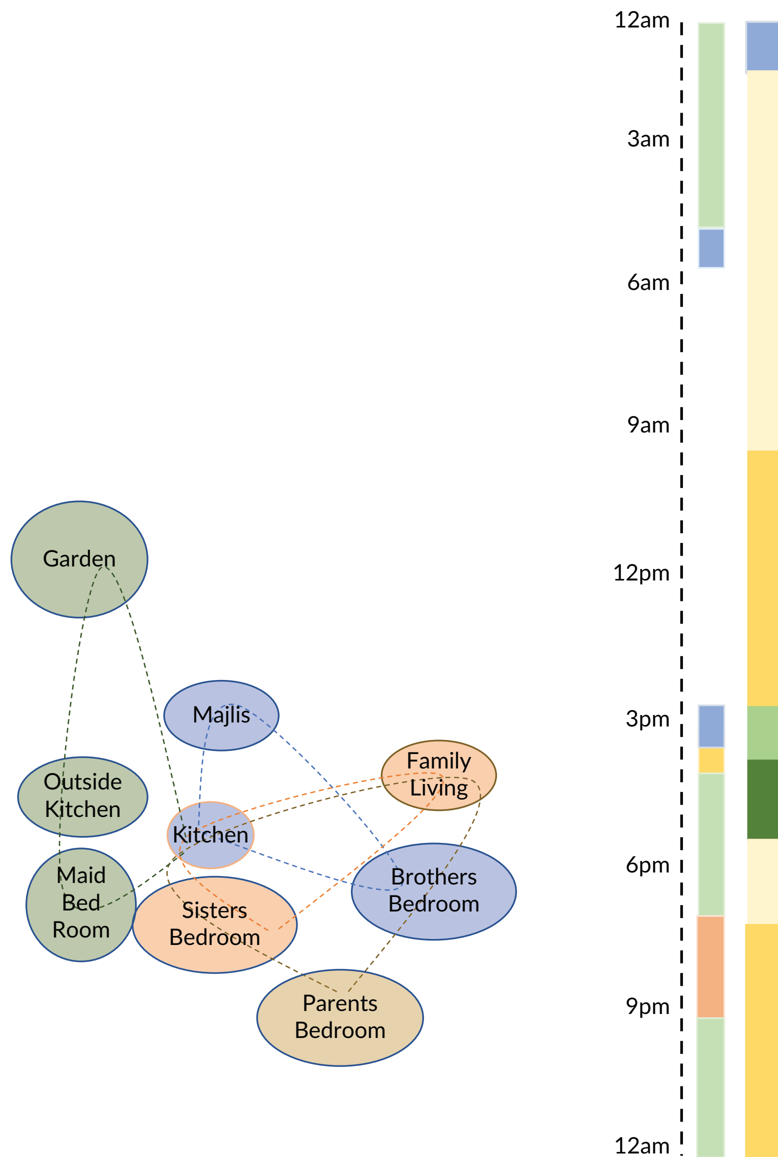

Figure 9. The analysis from the place and activity sample. It demonstrates how space is *actually* used, over a 24hr period, by the various members of a family.

working and socialising by the younger male members of the family, often spending 10 hours a day in there. The rest of the family did not enter this space throughout the 24-hour period during which data was collected and tended to use their bedrooms or the common family space more.

The majlis is exemplary for how spaces are actually used and reveals cultural connections that continue to be central to everyday hospitality practices and wider community identity. Hospitality, in this context, is both seen as necessary and compulsory, acting as a social mechanism through which intangible heritage is spatialised and can be read. This understanding is supported by interviews with designers, who described how, through the design of home elements, social standing and social control are reasserted as a part of the language of hospitality. Effectively reading and producing interiors, especially when rethinking the way a nation-building agenda is used to spatialise norms, requires consideration of the multi-layered aspects of domesticity.

Space, from an urban level right down to a domestic scale, is about defining boundaries—for example, the boundaries existing between national and expatriates or between guests, male, female, and family or service areas. Each of these boundaries has rituals and practices attached to it. Over the last 50 years, the Emirati villa has undergone significant changes from urban layout to interior spatial layout, some of which have been demonstrated here. This has led to shifts in how each generation understands their cultural settings differently. As a result, cultural transformations continue to evolve but the social code remains apparent.

This article has tried to outline a method for documenting a lived experience and the role it plays in the study of intangible heritage and interior design. The analysis of the dynamic nature of the home and its social status offers greater insights into the daily practices that take place within it. This documentation provides a valuable resource for reflection and study of how domestic space production is important to sharing socio-spatial practices. It also highlights how shared values, meanings, and expectations are transmitted between generations and become part of a national identity.

5. Conclusion

Various processes of modernisation have impacted Emirati domesticity. Rising standards of living, increased travel, and improvements in education have all directly contributed to the transformation of domestic life. Although transformations occur in every country, the extent and speed at which these changes have occurred in the UAE are unusual. While these transformations can be registered at the scale of domesticity, they have much broader implications for creating shared identity and value systems.

The subject of intangible heritage and nation-building is not unique to the UAE or the Gulf Corporation Council countries more generally and forms part of a wider conversation. What is unique however about the current discussion within the UAE is it happening now and its compression into a one-generation transition. Nation-building was a way to settle people in the 1970s, but it is still being developed and reflected upon today. Limited documentation on housing history makes this a vital time to collect more data and reconsider the role of domesticity in the wider nation-building programme.

Beyond the facades, grand entrances, and spacious interiors, intangible practices reveal cultural production. Observing and documenting ordinary daily practices permit us to understand the relationships between "authentic" and "invented" heritage. Spatial qualities and production are experienced through shared

meaning and purpose, as demonstrated by hospitality practices through which this article has attempted to understand spatial forms and Emirati culture. The study of intangible practices is an increasingly important aspect of studying cultural transformations within domesticity in the UAE but also elsewhere.

Acknowledgments

This research is part of six years of gathering design data. It would not have been possible without all the conversations with design professionals, students, citizens, mentors, and fellow colleagues.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Alawadi, K. (2018). *Lifescapes beyond bigness*. Artifice Press.

Alhasawi, M. (2019). The policies and process of preserving the historical and heritage buildings in Dubai City: Case study of historical district. *The Academic Research Community Publication*, *3*(4), 39–48.

Al-Mansoori, M. A. J. (1997). *Government low-cost housing provision in the United Arab Emirates: The example of the federal government low-cost housing programme* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Newcastle University. http://theses.ncl.ac.uk/jspui/handle/10443/438

AlMutawa, R. K. (2016). *National dress in the UAE: Constructions of authenticity* (New Middle Eastern Studies No. 6). British Society for Middle Eastern Studies.

Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.

Bambling, M., & Tracy, G. (2014). *Lest we forget: Structures of memory in the UAE*. La Biennale di Venezia.

Bani Hashim, A. R. (2018). *Planning Abu Dhabi: An urban history*. Routledge.

Bolger, N., Davis, A., & Rafaeli, E. (2002). Diary methods: Capturing life as it is lived. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *54*(1), 579–616. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.54.101601.145030

Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature*. Columbia University Press.

Boussaa, D. (2014). Rehabilitation as a catalyst of sustaining a living heritage: The case of Souk Waqif in Doha, Qatar. *Art and Design Review*, *2*, 62–71.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bristol-Rhys, J. (2009). Emirati historical narratives. *History and Anthropology*, *20*(2), 107–121. https://doi.org/10.1080/02757200902875407

Brotherton, B., & Wood, R. (2007). Key themes in hospitality management. In B. Brotherton & R. Wood (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of hospitality management* (pp. 35–61). SAGE.

Clark, R., & Pause, M. (1985). *Precedents in architecture*. Wiley.

Douglas, M. (1991). The idea of home: A kind of space. *Social Research*, *58*(1), 287–307.

Dubois, D., & Ordabayeva, N. (2015). *Social hierarchy, social status and status consumption*. Cambridge University Press.

El-Aswad, E.-S. (1996). *The folk house: An anthropological study of folk architecture and traditional culture of the Emirates society*. The United Arab Emirates University Publishing.

Elsheshtawy, Y. (2019). The Emirati *sha'bī* house: On transformations, adaptation and modernist imaginaries. *Arabian Humanities*, *2019*(11). https://doi.org/10.4000/cy.4185

Erskine-Loftus, P., Hightower, V., & Al-Mulla, M. (Eds.). (2016). *Representing the nation: Heritage, museums, national narratives and identity in the Arab Gulf State*. Routledge.

Evans, R. (1997). *Translations from drawing to building*. The MIT Press.

Foley, G. (1999). Back to basics: A political economy of workplace change and learning. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, *31*, 181–196.

Golfomitsou, S., & Rico, T. (2014). Perspectives from the Arabian Peninsula. *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites*, *16*(2), 99–104.

Hanson, J. (1998). *Decoding homes and houses*. Cambridge University Press.

Hawker, R. (2002). *Imagining a Bedouin past: Stereotypes and cultural representation in the contemporary United Arab Emirates*. BIMA. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265482968_Imagining_a_Bedouin_Past_Stereotypes_and_Cultural_Representation_in_the_Contemporary_United_Arab_Emirates

Hawker, R., Hull, D., & Rouhani, O. (2005). Wind-towers and pearl fishing: Architectural signals in the late nineteenth and early twentiety century Arabian Gulf. *Antiquity*, *79*(305), 625–635.

Heard-Bey, F. (1982). *From trucial states to United Arab Emirates*. Longman.

Hobsbawm, E., & Ranger, T. (Eds.). (1983). *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge University Press.

Hollows, J. (2008). *Domestic cultures*. McGraw Hill.

Ioannidou, E. (2020). Home no. 7 (a sample of). *Interiors*, *11*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/20419112.2020.1836804

Jenkins, H. (2003). Game design as narrative architecture. *Computer*, *44*(3), 118–130.

Kareem, A. (2018, September 8). September 9, 1998: 100 villas set for demolition in Dubai Marina. *Gulf News*. https://gulfnews.com/today-history/september-9-1998-100-villas-set-for-demolition-in-dubai-marina-1.2276020

Khalaf, S. (2002). Globalization and heritage revival in the Gulf: An anthropological look at Dubai Heritage Village. *Journal of Social Affairs*, *19*(75), 13–42.

King, A. D. (1984). The social production of building form: Theory and research. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *2*(4), 429–446. https://doi.org/10.1068/d020429

Kulper, P. (2013). A world below. *Architectural Design*, *83*(5), 56–63.

La Caze, M. (2007). At the intersection: Kant, Derrida, and the relation between ethics and politics. *Political Theory*, *35*(6), 781–805. https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591707307324

Lefebvre, H. (1974). *The production of space*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Litvak, M. (2009). Introduction: Collective memory and the Palestinian experience. In M. Litvak (Ed.), *Palestinian collective memory and national identity* (pp. 1–26). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230621633_1

Lori, N. (2013). *Unsettling state: Non-citizens, state power and citizenship in the United Arab Emirates* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. John Hopkins University. http://jhir.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/58792

MacLean, M. (2021). *National identity in the UAE* (Middle East Insight No. 253). Middle East Institute. https://mei.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Insight-253-Matthew-MacLean.pdf

Martín, E. (2021). Nation building and social change in the United Arab Emirates through the invention of Emirati cuisine. *The Sociological Review*, *69*(3), 538–559. https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261211009090

Massey, D. (1994). *Space, place, and gender*. University of Minnesota Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttttw2z.13

Mazzetto, S. (2018). Heritage restoration as a tool to promote architectural identity in the Gulf regions. *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture*, *47*(1), 3–11. https://doi.org/10.1515/pdtc-2017-0015

Miller, P., & Kozu, J. (2001). Social influence, empathy, and prosocial behavior in cross-cultural perspective. In W. Wosinska, R. Cialdini, D. Barrett, & J. Reykowski (Eds.), *The practice of social influence in multiple cultures* (pp. 63–78). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates London.

Ministry of Housing and Local Government. (1961). *Homes for today & tomorrow*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office. https://ia801307.us.archive.org/12/items/op1266209-1001/op1266209-1001.pdf

Park, J. (2017). *One hundred years of housing space standards: What now?* Unpublished manuscript. http://housingspacestandards.co.uk

Prager, L. (2015). Displaying origins: Heritage museums, cultural festivals, and national imageries in the UAE. *Horizons in Humanities and Social Sciences*, *1*(1), 22–46.

Rashid, M., Ara, D. R., & Abdalla, S. B. (2022). Mapping socio-physical legacies of Emirati villas: Contingency and spatial continuity or rift. *City, Territory and Architecture*, *9*(1), Article 3. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40410-021-00146-x

Reinisch, E., & Thomas, L. (2022, February 4). Are the United Arab Emirates on their way to becoming a democracy? *LSE Blog*. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/government/2022/02/04/are-the-united-arab-emirates-on-their-way-to-becoming-a-democracy

Sabban, R. (2018, December 17). State building, state branding and heritage in the UAE. *LSE Blog*. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/12/17/state-building-state-branding-and-heritage-in-the-uae

Selwyn, T. (2001). An anthropology of hospitality. In C. Lashley & A. Morrison (Eds.), *In search of hospitality: Theoretical perspectives and debates* (pp. 18–37). Butterworth Heinemann.

Silva, K. (2015). Paradigm shifts in global heritage discourse. *Journal of Space and Communication*, *1*(1), 1–15.

Sloane, M. (2014). Tuning the space: Investigating the making of atmospheres through interior design practices. *Interiors*, *5*(3), 297–314. https://doi.org/10.2752/204191114x14126916211184

Smith, W. (1970). *Housing: The social and economic elements*. University of California Press.

Sosa, M., & Ahmad, L. (2022). Urban portraits: Preserving the memory of modern architectural heritage in the United Arab Emirates. In R. Fabbri & S. Sooud Al-Qassemi (Eds.), *Urban modernity in the contemporary Gulf: Obsolescence and opportunities* (pp. 246–263). Routledge.

Unwin, S. (1997). *Analysing architecture*. Psychology Press.

Williams, R. (1958). *Culture and society*. The Hogarth Press.

Winton, A. (2013). Inhabited space: Critical theories and the domestic interior. In G. Brooker & L. Weinthal (Eds.), *Handbook of interior architecture* (pp. 40–49). Bloomsbury.

Yaneva, A. (2012). *Mapping controversies in architecture*. Ashgate.

About the Author

Sophie A. Johnson is an assistant professor in the School of Interior Design at the Canadian University Dubai. With over 25 years in design education, she brings together her expertise in practice-led research into design education. Her expertise lies in understanding (in)tangible heritage and cultural transformations through space production and interior spatial qualities. This is apparent in her teaching philosophy where practice-led research methods are developed with students to better understand spatial qualities, beyond purely aesthetics.