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Damien D Nouvel

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Organic, Planned or Both: Alserkal Avenue: An Art District by Entrepreneurial Action in an Organic Evolutionary Context

DAMIEN D. NOUVEL

University of Angers ddnouvel@gmail.com

While Dubai's urban scene is dominated by planned and pre-designed developments, grassroots initiatives have always been present and have helped shape the trajectory of the city's evolution. In one case, an industrial area, Al Quoz, has seen the clustering of art businesses over a relatively short period turning it into a cultural destination. Accounting for most of such clustering, Alserkal Avenue became Dubai's art hot-spot that changed the cultural map of the city. This article describes the rise of Alserkal Avenue, not only as the result of the entrepreneurial action of the proprietors but also as a product of a complex melange of economic, cultural, and urban evolutionary processes that intertwine with the rise of the city itself.

The story of Dubai is not simply about dazzling architecture or busy streets, and people from all over the globe racing against time following their financial dreams. Many tags can be associated with Dubai: pop-up city, global city, miracle city. However, the world has come to know it as a lofty oasis in a dull desert – a wonder city with all manner of contrasts. The wonder is not only in the many contrasting degrees with which Dubai presents itself – big but small, noisy but peaceful, lofty but humble, ambitious but realistic, opulent but generous, conservative but moderate, well-developed but immature. The wonder is also in the minute details of the journey to growth. Dubai has woven its story from tiny fractures of time and tiny fractures of space. Each of Dubai's parts represents a bigger picture, from the old downtown to the high-rise business and finance district. This same bigger picture is like a mighty skyscraper – built floor by floor, one at a time.

Dubai features another contrast: the planned and the unpredictable. The city's urban scene is unmistakably dominated by pre-designed and planned urban developments: a fact that is self-explanatory given the circumstances of the rise of the city as essentially a representation of the vision of its leaders. Yet, grassroots neighbourhoods enrich the picture at a different level.

In the heart of the city, few steps from its high-rise and commercial nerve centre and few steps from the vast, empty desert lies Alserkal Avenue, a vibrant neighbourhood that sums up the contrasts of Dubai, not only through the fragmented mix it is made from but also in the fragmented moments of history that led to its formation, its rise and to some extent its maturity. Alserkal Avenue, a commercial gated district dominated by art-related businesses, is claimed to be one of the first art districts in the city and the region. How a once small industrial warehouse rental business became a celebrated art district that attracts visitors and talented people from near and far mirrors many facets of Dubai's growth towards a globally celebrated city.

This article describes the rise of Alserkal Avenue, not only as the result of the entrepreneurial

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action of the proprietors but also as a product of a complex melange of economic, cultural, and urban evolutionary processes that intertwine with the rise of the city itself. Contrary to the common view that the rise of Dubai is as the result of accelerated development in the last two decades, its rise is rooted in a series of historic and ‘invisible’ milestones spread over decades of gradual evolution. Similarly, Alserkal’s evolution has its origin in invisible, yet decisive, events that defined the emergence of the district and shaped much of its trajectory. Some of these events were bound to the district itself, others to the city, while others were part of the rise of art and culture not only in the city but beyond. Alserkal has profited from opportunities which came at a time when a major ‘planned’ art and cultural destination was not on the horizon. From there, it helped create the cultural dynamics for the city to capitalize on and to achieve new milestones towards becoming a creative city.

Thus, this article is about windows of opportunity, those lost and those taken. Alserkal today is a focal point in the art and cultural fabric of the city and a game-changer, not only in the cultural environment of the city but also in the city’s built environment as it became an urban scene marker or a flagship by which its vicinity is defined (thanks to Alserkal, Al Quoz as an art district). This article is also about how Alserkal emerged as a result of small events, path dependency, and constraints. It is about the *favourable winds* supported the emergence of the district and overcame the friction of opposing dynamics.

Art Districts: A Bit of Theory on Why Art Businesses Come Together in One Place

Rising from a small industrial warehouse rental business to an art district depicts the widely discussed urban transformation of industrial zones led by artists and cultural and creative industries all over the world. New York’s SoHo or Meatpacking District, London’s Shoreditch, or Beijing’s 798 district are just a few examples of such transformation from an industrial fringe to a cultural district. Notions such as Cultural Districts, Cultural Quarters, Creative Milieus, and Cultural and Creative Clusters have, since the 1990s, been part of the academic and the political hype on the creative industries. The ‘clustering’ of creative industries is explained through the classical theory of industrial districts theorized by Marshall (1920) who highlighted the economic advantages of the agglomeration of businesses and through the theory of industrial clusters pioneered by Porter (1990). According to the Marshall Triad (input–output linkages, labour pooling, and knowledge spillover), co-located companies would have a competitive advantage over other external companies, while Porter’s ‘Diamond’ explained the determinants of spatial competitiveness, innovation, and the growth of the clustered companies (Brosnan *et al.*, 2016).

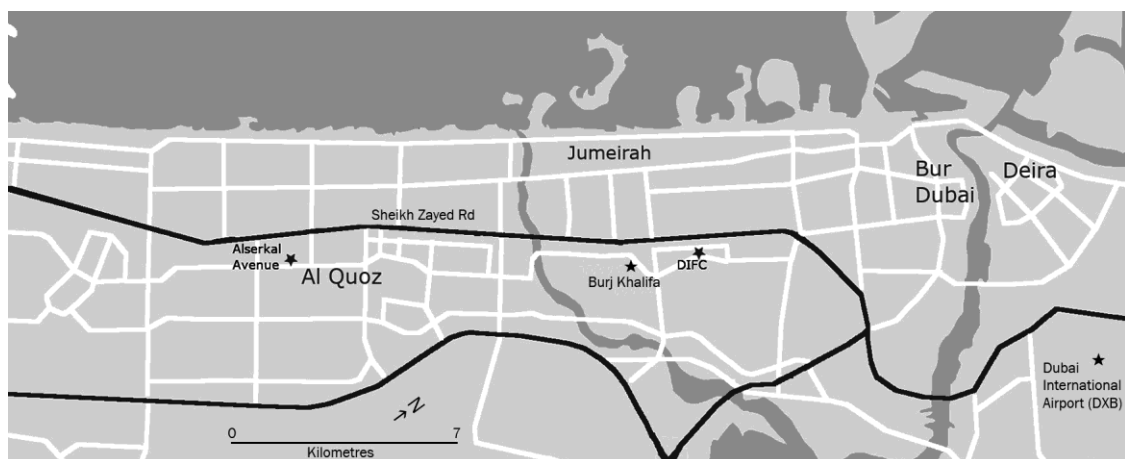


Figure 1. The position of Alserkal Avenue within Dubai; also shown is the location of Dubai International Financial Center (DIFC). (Source: Damien Nouvel)

The Favourable Winds

The answer to Alserkal’s position today as a one-of-a-kind art district in the region and the

place for a cluster of creative industries is found in its genesis. Theory tells us that the cluster's genesis and *initial conditions* shaped its future development (Carlsson 2006, Menzel *et al.*, 2010; Bernela *et al.*, 2019), and that the early-stage initiatives are crucially more effective in determining the path than the later stages (Carlsson, 2006; Feldman and Braunhjelm, 2006). Especially in grassroots developments, during the early days of formation, the self-organizing complex is subject to a host of different trajectories (Martin and Sunley, 2011). With time, contingencies decrease and become more tied to former choices: a fact that defines path dependency (David, 2007; Martin and Sunley, 2006).

Henceforth, according to this approach, the emergence of a cluster is achieved necessarily through two main stages. *The first stage*, in which the regional context in a specific industry is gradually developed (what Asheim *et al.*, 2011 call '*The regional advantage*'), and *the second stage* where a cluster emerges. The first stage is characterized by the accumulation of a series of slowly developing events that might be spontaneous, random and chance events or through public policy intervention. The second phase is necessarily dependent on, and conditioned by, the first stage (path dependency), and it is characterized by '*some triggering event coupled with an entrepreneurial spark*' (Carlsson, 2006).

In this article, I discuss the emergence of Alserkal Avenue from these two forces: the regional 'Favourable Winds' (mostly the city conditions that favoured the emergence of an art cluster) and the Triggering Entrepreneurial Events that coined the instance of birth of what became a stand-alone and a self-contained art district.

In the Beginning there was Al Quoz

The Al Quoz industrial area was one of the first urban expansions of the old city of Dubai back in the 1960s, along with Jumeirah

– the master plan of the city was prepared by British architect John Harris in 1960 (Elsheshtawy, 2012). While seaside Jumeirah neighbourhood was a residential area with mostly posh villas and low-rise residences, Al Quoz was to be the industrial nerve centre of the city.

The first introduction of commercial art galleries in the area took place in 1998 when Dariush Zandi opened The Courtyard complex including an art gallery and a café. Many see this as the critical path constraint that defined the history of art in the area in the years to come, as before then the area was purely an industrial zone on the edge of the desert. Other art entrepreneurs coming to Al Quoz around the same time included Jeffar Khaledi, a US artist of Palestinian origin then based in New York, who moved to Dubai after he participated in Sharjah Biennale. While Zandi built his café/gallery space, Khaledi rented a warehouse as a live-work space. With the increasing awareness of the importance of Al Quoz as the place for art galleries, Khaledi later opened his commercial art gallery, Gallery B21, in 2005. For these two entrepreneurs and the other art gallerists coming to Al Quoz in the following years, the move to Al Quoz is attributed primarily to the availability of 'inexpensive large spaces that can be transformed into artistic venues' (D'Souza, 2012). For Ramin Salsali, owner of Salsali Private Museum,¹ Al Quoz was 'the only place in Dubai where creative groups can have a large-scale space at a reasonable price'.² This mirrors the case for many industrial areas around the world which have become the place for art production (Grodach, 2011; Murdoch *et al.*, 2016) due to the availability of large spaces at comparatively cheap prices, especially in post-industrial cities where industrial activities declined (Lloyd, 2006; Mommaas, 2004). However, it is not until later (around 2005) that more art galleries started to appear in Al Quoz. The delay is attributed to two causes; first, the city's artistic and cultural activity was not yet well-developed, and artists were mostly active in the neighbouring Emirate of Sharjah, which had been the place for art and artists since the early 1980s; and second, commercial licensing for opening an art gallery in the Al Quoz industrial area was not an option at the time. Before 2008, gallerists were obliged to obtain a temporary permit for each exhibition they undertook. Instead, it was at Jumeirah where some art galleries first appeared in the city. For example, the Green Art Gallery, one of Dubai's first commercial art galleries, was already in business in a residential villa in Jumeriah when the Al Quoz galleries came into existence: it had first opened in 1995 as a *salon d'art*. The licensing issue had pushed some gallerists, such as Malini Gulrajani, the founder of the 1x1 Art Gallery, to abandon a large warehouse space in Al Quoz

for a residential villa in Jumeirah in 2003. Once this issue was solved and Al Quoz became home to art and artists (effectively after 2012), both the Green Art Gallery and the 1x1 Gallery moved Al Quoz – Alserkal Avenue’s second phase around 2015.

To understand the emergence of Al Quoz as the place for art businesses and artists, it is essential to understand the main catalysts behind the emergence of art activity at the city level, which we call Favourable Winds – helping the region emerge from a cultural slumber.

Art and the City: The Favourable Winds

Art and cultural development in Dubai is not, by any means, a sudden occurrence. However, compared to other domains and industries in the city during its first years of rise to regional city stardom, the development of Dubai’s cultural industries had a slow evolution. Diversification efforts by the city government in the early 2000s seemed to pay little attention to this market segment as the overall strategy was instead concentrated on bringing the city from its inferior regional position to a global city. Such a development strategy was mainly relying on infrastructure projects, urban development, and enhancing the service sector including mainly financial services, the consumer market, real estate, and the tourism industry. As such the city was *locked-in* in a trajectory of development conditioned by the accumulation events in the past which left a *spatial indeterminacy* (Boschma, 1997), and cultural industries found little fit with this trajectory. The ‘late’ evolution of cultural industries can be explained in economic geography by the window of locational opportunity approach which links human agency to new industry formation in place (Scott and Storper, 1987; Storper and Walker, 1989). This approach prescribes the framework of developing regional capabilities allowing new firms (or new industries, technologies) to form. It is especially relevant in the case where local capabilities are not sufficient for such formation (Martin and Sunley, 2011), which is, to a certain extent, the case of cultural industries in Dubai (and the UAE in general) as the city was described as witnessing a ‘*cultural slumber*’ (as contested by Elsheshtawy, 2012) up to the early 2000s. The build-up of regional capabilities is seen through increased development competition with similar regional city-states that were adopting similar development strategies, through the build-up of resources and the build-up of human capital. The local/regional mix of economic, social, and cultural capability build-up formed the mesh necessary for new creative industries to sprout. Such mesh, combined with pertinent small events, influential individual actions, and a quickly evolving institutional setup is what we call the favourable winds.

Art and the City: Small Events Opening Windows of Opportunities

The build-up of artistic activity in the city would not have been possible without several factors and events leading to a more friendly art business environment in the city – basically an elevated demand for art. One article that appeared in an art and lifestyle magazine in 2008 (Arsalan, 2008) showed that the shift in the art scene in the city was mainly due to two elements: first the geographical location of the city on the line between two worlds (the east and the west)

– and one can assume that that position has little meaning unless combined with a sophisticated logistics hub supported by efficient connectivity internationally which makes Dubai ‘*a cultural meeting point*’; and the second is the money. The economic boom encouraged ‘*art-hungry collectors*’ and this, naturally, created a demand for which the supply was in severe shortage. The demand in the art market was not only fuelled by wealthy businessmen in the Middle East, especially oil, gas, and real estate moguls, but also by the surge in hospitality projects which required ‘art’ for their decoration. As part of their competitive strategies, hotels acquired traditional artworks, portraits of the country leaders, often in ornate gold frames, and different contemporary artworks from the region all to decorate their luxury hotel lobbies.

The gap was soon to be filled by art galleries such as XVA, The Third Line and B21, some of the first commercial galleries in town. International auction houses and the media also helped fill the gap. Sotheby’s was the first on the Middle Eastern art scene, with their London auction in 2001, while Christie’s opened their Dubai office in 2005. *Canvas*, established in 2003, was the first art magazine in the region, while other magazines such as *Bidoun* and *Contemporary Practices*,

followed later.

In 2005, The Third Line Gallery was opened in the Al Quoz industrial zone by Sunny Rahbar and her partners Claudia Cellini, an art consultant previously working in Singapore, and Omar Ghobash, a UAE diplomat who was passionate about art and in 2007 co-founded The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC)³ in London. Before opening the gallery, Sunny Rahbar, a New York art graduate of Iranian origin, who was raised in Dubai, took up the position of resident curator at the Five Green, known as the first creative lifestyle showroom in the UAE, where she curated several exhibitions. The opening The Third Line Gallery brought the number of galleries in the Al Quoz area to four; the others were Etemad Gallery, Total Art at the Courtyard, Gallerie B21.

The year 2006 marked a historic turn when Christie's held its first auction of International Modern & Contemporary Art in the Middle East. The auction was held around 10 months after Christie's had established offices in Dubai (March 2005 to May 2006); the huge success of the auction reflected the growing appetite of art collectors in the region and the increased awareness of the value of art.

However, the famed Christie's Dubai 2006 auction, which is regarded as the main trigger for art development in the city, was dependent on a small 'hidden' event that led to its existence. Isabelle de la Bruyère, who was part of Christie's London team at the time of the auction and later the director of the Dubai office until 2012, highlighted the role of chance when Christie's was invited by the Dubai government to organize a charity auction for the 2003 festival 'Camel Caravan'. The success of this auction (twenty-two fibreglass camels sold for around US\$1.5 million), led Christie's to consider opening an office in the city, which, as noted above, they did in 2005 (as relayed by De la Bruyère in 2018).⁴ Similarly, the idea for the Gulf Art Fair (now Art Dubai) was partly inspired by the first Christie's auction and was born out of a casual conversation between two friends – art dealer John Martin and investment banker Benedict Floyd – and became a reality more than a year later with the support of the Dubai International Financial Center (DIFC). John Martin asserts the role of chance in triggering the whole process as the meeting between the two co-founders happened during a flight stopover in Dubai on his way to holiday in Australia.

The success of the Art Dubai Fair and Christie's auctions have directly and indirectly led to, or at least helped fuel, four main trajectories: an elevated intra-city cultural competition especially with the neighbouring Sharjah and Abu Dhabi; a surge in art collecting creating the opportunity for art galleries to appear on the economic map of the city; government attention to the potential impact of art and cultural developments; and a trend towards art and culture-led projects by public and private developers. It was the year 2008 that marked a peak in these four aspects: the Abu Dhabi Paris Art Fair and the Louvre Abu Dhabi were announced in the neighbouring Emirate; galleries started to pop-up in Dubai mainly at the Dubai International Financial Centre and in Al Quoz; a government entity was established to cater for the art and cultural evolution of the city, the Dubai Culture & Arts Authority (Dubai Culture); and a huge cultural-led mixed-use project was announced by the government – the Al Khor Cultural Project.

Two more important events in 2008 should be noted: it was the year that Alserkal Avenue was born as an industrial warehousing leasing business and also the year of the global financial crisis.

Good Times, Bad Times: More Favourable Winds

Both the announcement of the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Abu Dhabi Paris Art Fair implied increased competition between the Dubai and Abu Dhabi emirates to establish themselves as regional cultural hubs. The establishment of the Dubai Culture, a ministry-level public entity that manages cultural public facilities and cultural public policies in the Emirate (Gulf News, 2008a) was spearheaded by Sheikh Majid bin Rashid, the son of the Dubai Ruler. It was to replace the previous cultural authority (Dubai Cultural Council) chaired by Mohammad Al Murr, a local cultural enthusiast, and businessman. The press release announcing the establishment of Dubai Culture observed: 'The aim of the authority will be to enhance the international status of Dubai, which will participate in developing and forming the cultural and heritage scene of the 21st century in the region and around the globe' (*Ibid.*). This highlights that city branding and tourism were the core approach behind cultural public policies and

cultural developments at the time. As iterated in press interviews with government officials during that period, this was linked to the celebrated Dubai 2015 Strategic Plan, a broad governmental initiative to achieve strategic policy goals.

It is important to note that the announcement of the Dubai Culture also included the appointment of DIFC's director, Omar bin Suleiman, who successfully launched the DIFC Gulf Art Fair in 2007 and who was to launch the subsequent Art Dubai Fair in 2008, only 10 days after announcing Dubai Culture.⁵ The role of bin Suleiman was threefold, linking the government, business and financial society and the art market at an unorthodox focal point. This highlights the role of individuals in accelerating projects and growth and in bringing together different entities with a minimal level of conflict.

The government support did not stop with restructuring cultural entities and announcing cultural projects, it also materialized through non-profit organizations. Tashkeel Foundation, a non-profit entity engaged in promoting art activities and art education was announced in 2008 under the leadership of Sheikha Latifa bint Mohammed, the daughter of the ruler of Dubai. Sheikha Latifa, who had established Latifa College in 2003, was an art graduate of Zayed University. Since its conception, Tashkeel Foundation served as an independent resource for artists and designers living and working in the UAE.

With Art Dubai now an established regional art fair (around seventy galleries from thirty countries took part in Art Dubai 2008) more art galleries relocated to Dubai from other countries in the region, profiting from the friendly business environment and the new public initiatives to revive culture in the city. DIFC, spearheaded by Omar bin Suleiman, invited local and international art galleries to one of the DIFC complex buildings, the Gate Village, which eventually turned into the new art gallery hub in the city. The Cuadro Museum and the Fine Art Gallery were founded by Bashar Al Shuroogi, a Bahraini art collector and businessman, and inaugurated in 2008 at the DIFC in the presence of HH Sheikh Majed Bin Mohammed, the newly appointed Chairman of Dubai Culture. The Artspace Gallery, established in 2003 in the Fairmont Dubai Hotel, moved to the DIFC in November of the same year and the inauguration was sponsored by DIFC whose Governor stated: 'By promoting art galleries like Artspace, DIFC seeks to support Dubai's initiatives to harness this new artistic energy in the region. Artspace's new gallery promises to make a key contribution to this effort by showcasing the best in regional art' (Gulf News, 2008b). It was clear that the government of Dubai was making great strides in promoting culture and cultural industries in the business life of the city.

Almost two months after the launch of Dubai Culture, the ruler of Dubai announced an ambitious cultural project to 'revive the national cultural heritage of Dubai' (Landais, 2008): the Al Khor Cultural District. The project was set to renovate the old historical district of Dubai, where prominent Dubai culture and heritage facilities such as Dubai Museum and the Al Fahidi historical district with its many cultural provisions already existed, and turn it into a tourist and cultural destination. Again, the project was part of a higher-level aim 'to place Dubai as a unique sports and cultural hub on both the regional and international levels' (*Ibid.*) Nevertheless, the project never saw the light of day as the financial crisis hit Dubai (and the world) at the end of 2008. Michael Schindhelm (2011), a German consultant at Dubai Culture at the time, gives an account of the development of the strategy of Dubai to build the Opera complex, which was eventually downsized in the aftermath of the financial crisis and later awarded to Emaar to be built in downtown Dubai next to Burj Khalifa rather than in the Al Khor area.

Between 2008 and 2010 art businesses, like other economic activities at the time, were trying to dodge the financial turmoil. The 2008 global financial crisis saw the revenues of both Christie's and Bonhams take a sharp dive, and prompted Bonhams to halt auctions in the city (after less than two years in the city without much activity).

The financial crisis was not all bad news – at least for the art community and art businesses in the UAE. Three main 'positive' outcomes were seen as an adaptive change in the drastic times of financial downturn:

- (a) prices of properties were hit heavily and larger spaces became more affordable and leaseholders became less strict about the industry they were targeting, i.e. large warehouses in Al Quoz became more accessible to artists and art collectors looking to open their first gallery;
- (b) art and cultural government bodies in the main three emirates became more conscious of the importance of synchronizing and coordinating their cultural agendas to keep art and

cultural events happening in different times of the year; and (c) the market saw the emergence of new collectors as some investors hit by the financial crisis saw a diversification opportunity and a safer investment in art.

Synchronizing art activities in different emirates was meant to be mutually profitable as visitors were from the region and around the world. From 2008, it was clear that the art scene in the country revolved around three major events Art Dubai in March, Sharjah Biennale in May, and Art Abu Dhabi (called Art Paris Abu Dhabi in 2007 and 2008) in November. Therefore, while a 'major' event is taking place in one city, small 'satellite' exhibitions are announced in the other cities. For example, the Abu Dhabi Musical and Arts Festival was opened on 21 March 2008 to coincide the occurrence of Art Dubai (19– 21 of the same month), and another exhibition, the Art of Islam Exhibition, was opened days before Art Dubai (on 16 March) also in Abu Dhabi. Other examples from that year include exhibitions in the Qasba Area in Sharjah (21 March) and Christie's auction (21 March). In 2009, Art Dubai and the Sharjah Biennial coincided for the first time.

Meanwhile in Al Quoz: The First Movers and the Organic Sprout

As Dubai became a strong spot on the radar of regional art businesses after Christie's 2006 art sale and the 2007 DIFC Gulf Art Fair, Al Quoz came onto the radar of artists and art gallerists in the city as the place to be. At the time of DIFC Gulf Art Fair, four art galleries existed in Al Quoz: B21 Progressive Art Gallery, 1x1 Art Gallery, The Third Line and Total Arts/The Courtyard. To the south of Al Quoz, other art spaces were already functioning: Meem Gallery, The JamJar Art Centre and Ductac (Dubai Community Theatre and Art Centre) at The Mall of the Emirates.

In December 2007, Hassan Sharif, one of the pioneer Emirati artists, co-created and cofounded The Flying House in Al Quoz, an art workshop, gallery and institute to promote mainly contemporary Emirati artists. The opening of The Flying House was a milestone in putting Al Quoz as an art hub on the map in Dubai: first, it established itself as Dubai's first art exhibition space almost exclusively for contemporary Emirati art; second, it created a busy calendar starting with more than 2,500 art works and ten Emirati artists led by Sharif himself, Emirati art pioneer Mohammed Kazem, and the Dutch curator Jos Clevers.

A 2008 article on The Flying House highlighted the new art space as hidden in the industrial nature of the area: '... there is nothing to distinguish The Flying House from any of the other buildings on the street. There's no sign, no flag, no symbol. But in the garden of number 18, a tree is wrapped in ribbon, piles of rocks bound with wire are entombed beneath glass and dozens of tin cans have faces punched in them' (Behan, 2008). The Flying House was previously a residential villa owned by Abdul Rahman Sharif, the brother of Hassan Sharif, an art enthusiast and long-time supporter of his brother's art career. The new art space was, in one way or another, an invitation to more newcomers to Al Quoz.

Six months later and not far from The Flying House, the Ayyam Gallery, owned by cousins Khaled and Hisham Samawi and founded in Damascus in 2006, moved to a warehouse owned by Abdul Monem Alserkal in the Al Quoz area in Dubai, attracted by the large spaces of warehouses here. The move of Ayyam Gallery was the trigger that attracted more galleries in the years to come to form Alserkal Avenue in 2010.

Before being rebranded as an art hub, the industrial hangar property owned by Abdulmonem Alserkal was leased on an annual basis to selected tenants (small and clean industries), and a specialized real estate company managed it (The Specialist Real Estate – under the Alserkal family business). At the time Alserkal was racing to capitalize on strong real estate market trends where prices were at their highest values. This was when the Al Ayyam Gallery was inaugurated in mid-2008. When asked why they chose Al Quoz when they first opened their gallery in the city back in 2008, the owners of the Al Ayyam Gallery, gave two reasons: the big spaces and the central location.

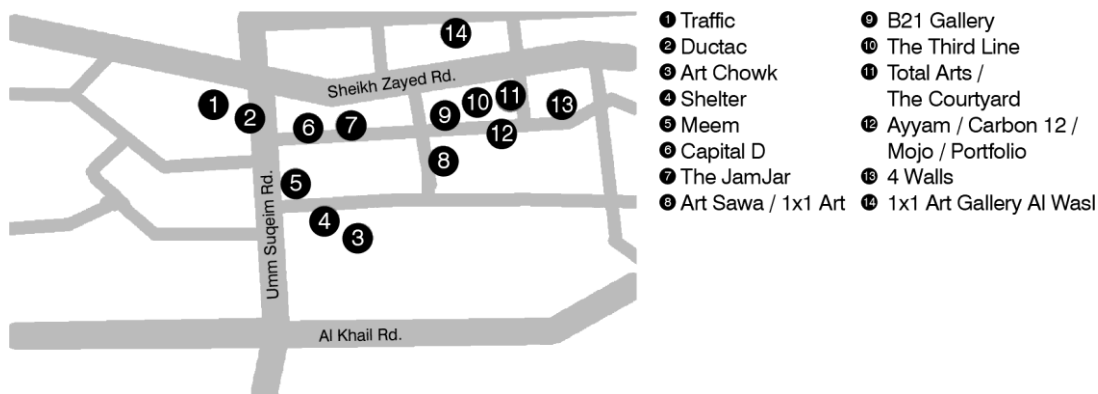


Figure 2. Map of the art galleries in Al Quoz in 2010. (Source: Based on ArtMap2010)

More galleries opened in Al Quoz between 2008 and 2010. However, by 2010, DIFC was ahead in the process of attracting art galleries to its premises as a diversification/attraction strategy, making it the second art gallery concentration in the city after Al Quoz. While DIFC galleries were together in the same complex, Al Quoz galleries were dispersed over a wider area. This changed when three art galleries moved to one place in Al Quoz (Alserkal property) to make use of vast spaces and reasonable rents. Those galleries were Carbon 12, owned by Kourosh Nouri and Nadine Knoder which moved to Alserkal from Marina Towers in 2009, B21 Gallery owned by Jeffar Khaledi and Isabelle van den Eynde which moved to Alserkal after rebranding the gallery to follow Isabelle's name (Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde) in 2010, and the Green Art Gallery which moved from Jumeriah in 2010 too.

There were still galleries around such as The Third Line on Street 6 (opposite Alserkal Avenue), The Jamjar (Street 17 – later moved to Alserkal), Traffic and The Fridge on Umm Suqeim Road, Art Sawa (Street 323 – later moved to DIFC) and 1x1 Contemporary Gallery (Street 8 – later moved to Alserkal). Others that still existed included Total Arts at the Courtyard, Cartoon Gallery, and the now defunct galleries 4Walls Gallery (Street 4) and the Hamael Gallery (Street 6).⁶

The Entrepreneurial Actions: Building on the Organic Evolution

Until 2011, art gallery businesses were attracted to Al Quoz, and Alserkal Avenue in particular, because of the relatively low rents, the quality, large-sized warehouses on one hand and its location and easy access to the other parts of the city – a typical agglomeration logic that fits into the Marshallian approach to industrial clusters. One article depicting the move of the Green Art Gallery from Jumeriah to Alserkal Avenue only talks about the quality of the new premises as the main motivation: 'The new premises in Al Serkal Avenue in Al Quoz embodies all that Atassi [owner of the gallery] aspires to. The interior architecture is spatial, white, clean-lined and contemporary – standard fare for modern art galleries' (Moosa, 2011).

With the increase in the number of exhibitions and events and the consequent influx of visitors to Alserkal, new dynamics started to attract other players to find their space in the emerging district, while the complex ownership saw the opportunity to capitalize on the new reality of the space. The observations made by the owner and the managers of the real estate management company overlapped with the will of other art players in Al Quoz. in addition to the low performing real estate market at the time.

William Lawrie, the co-founder of the Lawrie Shabibi Gallery remembers the time when the Alserkal Avenue warehousing project was introduced as, more or less, an art district: 'Early in 2011, Alserkal Avenue, which at that time already had three galleries – Ayyam, Carbon 12 and Isabelle van den Eynde – suddenly got three more: Green Art, Grey Noise and us [Lawrie Shabibi Art Gallery]. *It was a happy accident*: the Alserkal galleries soon became among the most active in the region. This was noticed by the landlord, who quickly re-strategised to expand Alserkal Avenue to what you see today' (Harris, 2016). Lawrie's argument was confirmed by other art galleries in Alserkal Avenue. Field research found that five out of the first six galleries in

Alserkal Avenue agreed that until the end of 2011 the relationship with the management was merely one of landlord/tenant and was mostly done through the property management company.⁷ Things started to change with the increasing social events and exhibitions and the growing numbers of visitors to the site. Lawrie's description acknowledges the strategic action that the Alserkal management took to change its course in history, by building on a particular set of initial conditions (the same favourable winds that put Al Quoz on the cultural map of the city combined with an entrepreneurial readiness). Such strategic action was set to drive growth by creating better conditions for art businesses, artists and the public and it started by creating a brand that saw the space turning into an art district.

Since its early days, the Alserkal management has tried to brand Alserkal as *the* cultural district of Dubai – referring repeatedly to its organic origin and the fact that it was the first of its kind in the country. In their promotional material, the district is declared *The Cultural District*; *The Art District*; and the *Hub for Art and Creativity*.⁸ Such narrative strategies for brand building soon paved the way for a locked-in trajectory pivoted around art district placemaking. What had started as an organic clustering of art galleries and creative businesses was soon changed to a planned/restricted path by a strategic shift and a dedicated management team. From this moment on, around the beginning of 2012, an art district was intentionally set as the target.

Other than rebranding the place, the change in the relation between occupants and the new management had to adapt to the change in the characteristics of the influx of visitors:

Those galleries attracted a lot of people. Then all of a sudden, we [Alserkal Management] got to capitalise on this. How do we capitalise on this? We need to create infrastructure around this'.⁹

As such, creating the brand was a consequence, in part, of the increasing interest from the public which was in itself a consequence of the organic concentration of art galleries – *the first movers*.

Figure 3. An excerpt from the first Alserkal Avenue website in 2013 where it describes itself as an 'organic art district' (emphasis added).

While business and individual networks between art gallerists and artists had existed before moving to Alserkal, these networks were enhanced by creating a dedicated art event management team within Alserkal Avenue. One of the first events under the new management was the Al Quoz Art Festival which took place in November 2012. This brought together Art Dubai, the Dubai International Film Festival, Cinema Akil and ArtintheCity (an initiative managed by The JamJar and Dubai Culture) to Alserkal Avenue and succeeded in engaging around thirty venues within the Alserkal Avenue and in the Al Quoz area to receive art and cinema enthusiasts over a full agenda of events for one day. Future versions of this annual activity extended over a weekend rather than one day.

These early events, managed or created by the Alserkal Avenue Management, were targeting an increased influx of visitors but also bringing new tenants to the complex. Potentially, art galleries and creative businesses participating in these events were tempted to move permanently to Alserkal. This strategy proved successful when, for example, The Third Line, The Jamjar and Cinema Akil, found their new place when Alserkal inaugurated its expansion by the end of 2014.



An Art District is Born: The Evolution

Vilma Jukurte, Alserkal Avenue's Director, explained the expansion:

We had more and more galleries joining the community and reached the point where we had no space to accommodate the new creative businesses. The Alserkal family made an investment of Dh55 million to extend the neighbourhood by 76,200 square metres, to twice its former size. (Hill, 2016)

The plot next to Alserkal Avenue was occupied by the National Marble & Tile Factory owned by Alserkal family (part of Nasser Abdul Latif Alserkal & Sons group, chaired by Eissa bin Nasser Alserkal – father of Abdelmonem bin Eissa Alserkal, and Ahmed bin Eissa Alserkal) since at least the 1980s (Bricault, 1988, p. 361) (the group itself was established by Nasser bin Abdul Latif in 1947).¹⁰

Announcing the expansion plans in 2012, Alserkal was building on its brand awareness and reputation to drive growth. The strategy for the next phase of the district was focused on strengthening the brand by attracting international players, reputable local creative businesses, and more events. Also, the strategy meant generating more profit by increasing its leasing rates, offering retail and café and restaurant spaces at above-average rates and dedicating more on-demand spaces for events. Alserkal profited from the growing interest of international players and sought to attract them to their premises. The art exhibitions (mainly Art Dubai) were the perfect channel for artists, art galleries, and other art-related businesses to explore new ventures in the city. It provided Alserkal Avenue with the opportunity to attract 'tenants' from beyond the local market. As Dubai's image as an incubator for art and art businesses, evidenced by a growing reputation of its art fairs and cultural events, interest from international players was also on the rise. Alserkal Avenue made sure they relayed the message that they sought to host branches of art businesses that were already established abroad. As early as 2010, Grey Noise co-owner Umer Butt was their first out-of-town client as he moved his business from Pakistan. Other cross-the-border art galleries welcomed into Alserkal after it was rebranded in 2012 included the Etemad Art Gallery from Iran (later moved out to The Courtyard Building across the street from Alserkal Avenue), the Barakat Gallery from Jerusalem (later moved to the Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi) and the La Galerie Nationale, an artisanal furniture and art dealer based in Paris.

After that, the expansion plan was a true opportunity for Alserkal to capitalize on their nascent status as an emerging art district (the first in the country) and to shift their strategy to develop a selection process by which they chose the best candidates to fill their spaces (700 submissions for fifty spaces available as per Vilma Jukurte, the director of Alserkal Avenue) (Hill, 2016).

While the first international art gallerists entering Alserkal premises were the Leila Heller Gallery from New York and the Custot Gallery from London, local players included The JamJar and The Third Line, two of the earliest players in the art business in the Al Quoz area. Other tenants in the new expansion included two restaurants and one design furniture exhibition, among others.



Figure 4. The Courtyard. (Photo: Damien Nouvel)



Figure 5. A group of students on an educational visit to Alserkal Avenue. (Photo: Damien Nouvel)

Network Dynamics: Strong but Fragmentary

It is worth noting that the emergence of Alserkal Avenue happened without the involvement of government-related entities in the process. On the contrary, according to the observation of some interviewees, it seems like both parties, Alserkal and the government (mainly Dubai Culture) were acting deliberately in separate directions (or as Antonia Carver, the previous manager of Art Dubai, put it: *disjointed*) (Brady, 2017). While this is understood in the early days of Alserkal Avenue (before it was rebranded as an art district in 2012), the minimal level of collaboration later is sometimes not entirely justifiable.

Before 2012, Alserkal was not presented as an art district, and governing of the district was done in a pure tenant-landlord relationship style. Galleries were acting on their own without a central entity to manage their collaboration among themselves or with other parties out of the district. In brief, up to 2011, there were only six art galleries. It was the city's big cultural events, such as Art Dubai, Sikka Art Fair, and the Sharjah Biennale that brought private and public entities together. Government support was not provided for the annual exhibitions, but it was manifested through individual initiatives such as in the case of art awards. For example, Ramin Salsali was twice awarded the Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Patrons of the Arts Award while his project to open a private museum project was met with applause from Dubai Culture (Simpson, 2011). Even after the area was rebranded as an art hub, it was the private initiatives of art galleries that brought Dubai Culture to Alserkal Avenue through dispersed and 'rare' events rather than Alserkal management.

When asking why Alserkal in the last ten years of existence did not manage to convince the government entities to participate in the beautification of the area and, at least, upgrade the conditions of the surrounding streets, a manager at Alserkal Avenue highlighted the industrial nature of the area as part of the reality of the district – in a way to avoid admitting the lack of effective communication with the government. On the other hand, though, some of the complex's tenants have highlighted the issue as evidence that the government was not putting much attention or resources into promoting the area. Nevertheless, from 2015 onwards this has seen some change.

For example, Made in Al Quoz (previously Made in Alquoz), was a government initiative (by Dubai Culture) part of the Dubai 2021 plan and in collaboration with Art Dubai and Alserkal Avenue: its focus was in part to upgrade the condition of the Al Quoz area and transform it into a Creative District. Later, the initiative was expanded to include the Dubai Municipality; Brand Dubai, the creative arm of the Government of Dubai Media Office; the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing; and the Roads and Transport Authority. A possible outcome of this initiative in terms of the urban transformation of Al Quoz is to be seen in the coming years.

Conclusion

Rather than planned and controlled by the government, the art scene in Dubai has emerged unpredictably, from little or no predetermined conditions, in a series of 'non-linear' trajectories that comprise ups and downs at different levels. Antonia Carver, the previous director of Art Dubai and the current manager of Art Jameel, summarized the complexity of the art development in Dubai:

The arts scene here across the UAE has developed in quite a post-modern way – non-linear, circulatory, at speed, occasionally disjointed. In Dubai in particular, this growth has been organic in nature, and driven by a series of such dedicated and passionate individuals, working across the commercial and non-commercial sector. (Brady, 2017)

What applies to the art scene in the city as a whole could be extended to the art district Alserkal Avenue and Al Quoz. The trajectory of the area's evolution was, and still is, a multi-layer mesh of events that are mostly fragmentary and mostly unpredictable. Even though some actions are planned, the resulting status is achieved at a certain speed that is fuelled by 'passion' and 'persistence' whether at the collective level (government and institutions) or the individual level (companies and individuals).

In a number of interviews with art market players (including the Manager of Alserkal Avenue, a government official, and a Dubai based urban developer), the question on their view of the organic evolution aspect of an urban district (i.e. a cultural district) is met with their understanding of the phenomenon as part of the ecosystem in general. Confusing the complexity of the interconnected scene of the city (the city as a complex adaptive system) with the organic dynamics of the emergence of these districts might be part of this misconception. The concentration of art businesses in Al Quoz happened organically, but the development of Alserkal Avenue and the change in its identity from an industrial complex to an art district happened because of entrepreneurial action aiming at benefiting from real estate logic (mainly leasing spaces) to generate visitor footfall and profit. In this context, we infer that it is the same real estate logic that governs the urban economics of Dubai that has led a private entity to build on the organic development of an industrial district becoming an art district to initiate a cultural industrial complex that follows, at the same time, a cultural agenda and real estate business.¹¹

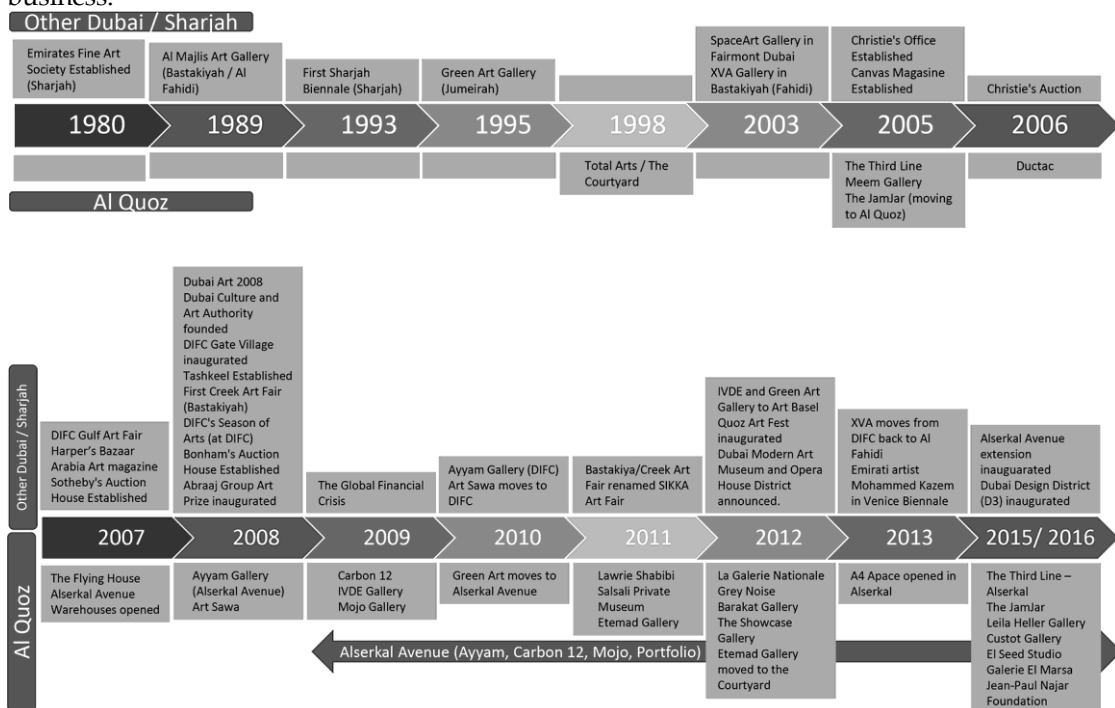


Figure 6. Timeline of Dubai Art Development, 1980–2016. (Source: Damien Nouvel)

Similarly, the entrepreneurial rise in Dubai is fuelling the rise of these districts. Dubai is witnessing an increasing number of homegrown start-ups and attracting international players into the cultural scene, growing together with government-led initiatives to encourage a more vivid scene.

What is interesting in the case of Dubai art districts is how complexity works in favour (or sometimes in disfavour) of building the district either as an organic phenomenon as is the case of the Al Quoz industrial area or by planned action as in DIFC and later in Dubai Design District D3. However, complexity also means that changes applied or absorbed by agents might split the system away from its current status so that it is not necessarily stable or settled. A planned project is left for organic growth at some point, while on the other hand, an emerging organic development might be the target of strong intervention that constrains its trajectory and thus it falls into the hands of a controlling authority. The district can witness both cases over time; it evolves by crossing borders of planning and organic development from time to time.

NOTES

1. Salsali Private Museum closed its doors permanently in June 2019.
2. See <https://mojehmen.com/meet-the-galleristsramin-salsali/>.
3. See <http://www.arabculturefund.org>.
4. De la Bruyère spoke during a seminar on the evolution of arts in the UAE (Conférence: La scène artistique des Emirats Arabes Unis aujourd'hui) at the Institut du monde arabe, Paris, 26 September 2018.
5. Dubai Culture was announced on 3 March 2008, while Art Dubai was inaugurated on 19 March 2008.
6. Art in the City (2012) ArtMap 16 – The Comprehensive Guide to Arts and Culture in the UAE, September 2012–January 2013.
7. The five galleries are: Lawrie and Shabibi, Carbon 12, IVDE Gallery and Ayyam. Interviews took place in June 2017.
8. In a 2012 promotional video, Alserkal Avenue also branded itself as 'Dubai's Cultural District'. See: Cultural District by Alserkal Avenue. A Film on YouTube. Published online on 22 January 2014 and available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orP-rplXaOk&gl=US&hl=en>.
9. From an interview between the author and Alserkal Avenue management team. June 2017.
10. See <http://alserkal-group.com/about-us/>.
11. Currently Alserkal Avenue is home to thirteen commercial art galleries, four non-profit organisations, twenty-four other art businesses (design, photography, art educations, workshops etc.), seven cafés and restaurants, in addition to other art and non-art industrial spaces.

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