

Feature Articles

Dubai's Heritage House Museums: A Semiosis of Melancholy

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Although spectacular resorts and high-profile shopping venues now symbolize Dubai, the city has an important heritage of residential buildings, many of which have recently been reconstructed as small museums. This article analyzes several of these projects: the Sheikh Saeed bin Maktoum Museum, the Al-Siraaj Gallery in the Obaid and Jumaa bin Thani house, the Majlis Gallery in the Mir Abdullah Amiri house, and the Dubai National Museum. It argues that together these house museums register a profound sense of melancholy in the face of an urban fabric being relentlessly developed by forces largely unresponsive to history, heritage, or cultural continuity.

From outside they were inscrutable — cubes of burned pastry without windows. But here and there a bit of wall had fallen out, and I caught passing glimpses of courtyards, vines, stairways, lattices, carved doors and hanging balconies; all the essential ingredients of the inward-looking order of the Arab household.

— Jonathan Raban

This passage from Jonathan Raban's 1979 travelogue *Arabia* recounts the author's impressions of the traditional courtyard houses of the Dubai Creek area in the 1970s.¹ Abandoned and exposed, they seemed to authorize for him a peculiar form of voyeurism, one inseparable from a melancholy of ruin and disrepair. In their presence, Raban experienced a profoundly visual desire to possess an otherwise inaccessible and proscribed "inward order." Initially "inscrutable," this could be "caught" by means of "glimpses" through unplanned openings onto the spaces where private life had previously unfolded out of sight.

In retrospect, what is perhaps most interesting about Raban's insights about these houses — in addition to the visual drive to violation they seemed to provoke — is how a sense of transgression and revelation still accompanies them now that many have been transformed into museums. In a sense, this fragment from Raban's memoir thus of-

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fers initial insight into how the heritage house develops the received conceptual logic of the history museum as an institutional and architectural type — only here in a particularly Arab and Gulf urban and cultural context.

In Dubai, the heritage house as a cultural construct should first be understood in relation to the megamuseum and the shopping mall. The latter has begun to assume the role of popular “museum” — with perhaps the most explicit example being the Ibn Battuta Mall, which devotes large areas along its promenades to vitrine-based displays and object reconstructions seeking to document the travels of the famous Arab adventurer. But in Dubai these two models are augmented by the heritage house museum, which typically appears as little more than a container for various “archives,” sometimes only loosely connected to the house itself or to local histories of place. Alternatively, these heritage houses may appear as fetish objects in their own right, essentially reduced to the status of found artifacts, suitably modified, in which purely visual qualities dominate. Restored and repurposed, Dubai’s historic mansions thus serve as little more than anthropological exhibitions of cultural traditions; vessels for variously politicized agendas related to the enhancement of national identity; or, more radically, autonomous and free-standing urban “sculptures.” Ironically, however, it is precisely these reductions of purpose that allow them to perform an explicative function effectively unavailable to museums that assume more conventional roles.

In this article we view this condition as symptomatic of more general cultural conditions. We will explore how these museums capture something otherwise largely ineffable, related to an overwhelming sense of loss and absence in Dubai. This, in fact, reflects a more general aspect of the museological and heritage project *in toto*, in which understanding is necessarily produced as much out of absence as presence. As part of our investigation we will consider the degree to which these museums are “authentic” reconstructions of the heritage houses they are developed around, and we will reflect on various degrees of fit between specific house museums, their status as heritage vessels, and their museum contents. We are not primarily interested in producing a criticism of these museums; rather, we would like to consider what they have to say “as is.” But in the process, we will necessarily consider what “authenticity” and “tradition” can be taken to mean in this context.

It might be argued that in a “new” city of global proportions and vast developments such as Dubai, small heritage museums have no enduring value. To the contrary, we believe that these institutions — precisely in the apparently problematic and diminished form they present — are deeply compelling as revelatory objects. Indeed, it is here that their value primarily lies. Therefore, rather than simply attempting to grasp these buildings as independent heritage artifacts or specific museums of various kinds, we will argue that their explanatory power lies in how they collectively constitute an unwitting reading of the Dubai condition and reveal new

constructs of shared meaning in a rapidly changing urban and cultural context.

MUSEUM CONCEPTS

To briefly put Dubai’s house museums in context, there are basically two models by which institutions approach the problem of preservation, production and transmission of historical knowledge. The classic museum is typically expressed in a monumental architectural style that reinforces the institution’s museological operations. In general, such museums emphasize the one-way delivery of expert knowledge to an audience considered to be essentially passive. The British Museum is usually taken to be the canonical example of the type. For our purposes, what is most important about this type is that artifacts in the collections of such museums are normally displayed in conjunction with graphic, textual or audio-visual explanations, without which the artifacts are presumed to be unintelligible. Occasionally, docents are also present to answer questions and guide understanding of the artifacts on display. Despite many critiques of this form of artifact-centered knowledge transmission, it remains the standard approach to museum display.²

The other principal type of museum includes newer, less formal, and relatively more theatrical outdoor venues and heritage villages that attempt to reconstruct historical environments and reenact historical activities. The roots of such heritage venues can be traced to nineteenth-century open-air museums, in which mock villages of ethnographic “difference” were constructed for the edification and entertainment of the citizens of colonizing nations. In practice, this meant gathering items considered representative of a particular culture, and then peopling these settings with performers from distant locales or from “traditional” populations.³ Paul Oliver has noted that in terms of their built environments these outdoor museums either attempted to conserve buildings within a larger existing compound or relocate them to a newly defined and controlled landscape.⁴

Generally, historical environments such as the outdoor museum or the period room represented a reaction against the classical museum’s strategy of presenting historical environments through architectural casts and fragments. Like earlier ethnic villages, heritage villages also offered a wide array of “living” demonstrations involving, for example, costumed docents, live craftwork, or the preparation of traditional foods. They focused on placing and activating past expressions and ways of life in a physical context — one effect of which was to encourage anecdotal rather than systematic interpretation. However, these open-air museums, which supposedly retained and presented inherited craft techniques and products, also typically envisioned a highly idealized preindustrial life and culture.⁵ And, as attempts to retrieve vanishing traditions, they were ultimately fueled by an acute sense of loss and

a deepening sense of nostalgia. This was, for example, the ideology presented at World's Fairs, and institutionalized at Henry Ford's outdoor museum of 1927, originally called The Early American Village (now known as Greenfield Village).⁶

In her classic essay "Objects of Ethnography," Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett characterized these two approaches as *in context* and *in situ*.⁷ Essentially, *in-situ* approaches, typical of heritage village museums, attempt to preserve a sense of linkage between artifacts and the environments in which they were once embedded, while *in-context* approaches tend to isolate objects in order to place them in interpretive or explanatory contexts. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett noted, this emphasis on the physical object derived from the museum's origin in the "cabinet of curiosities" — constructions which understandably invested the "fragment" with special importance. In a very real sense, then, museology has deep roots in an isolated fascination with objects. Only later did the centrality of the object combine with the view that a meaningful sense of physical or interpretive context should also be provided.

Although Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's "Objects" essay was ultimately concerned with the vicissitudes of a subject group's depiction, as produced through the positioning and rendering of artifacts, her identification of the *in-situ/in-context* duality can be seen more generally to provide the core logic underlying the historico-museological enterprise. That is, in this overarching museological conceit, the necessarily missing cultural surround that once lent completeness and meaning to artifacts is swapped for either an explicitly interpretive apparatus or some plausible rendition of an environment in which the artifact might have been found. Either way, the artifact remains centrally important.

At first, the heritage house museums of Dubai might appear to be variations or elaborations of these two approaches. Surprisingly, however, as museums, they function largely in the absence of the very artifacts that would be expected to provide their *raison d'être*. In maintaining a museological posture without the centrality of the artifact, they effectively highlight the very feeling of loss and melancholy that accompanies the museological and physical heritage-conservation enterprise. This is a feeling that is forever ignored, suppressed or disavowed to "make sense" of, or "make whole," a history that can never be fully reconstituted. In a sense, then, the underlying urge of museology and artifact-focused heritage conservation is to provide a kind of completion that might compensate for just this sense of loss. And the most important contribution of the Dubai heritage house museums is perhaps to draw attention precisely to this disavowal at the heart of the enterprise. Without their dual status as both museums and historical artifacts, this would not be possible — just as without their double role as heritage objects and heritage containers, the larger cultural and ideological operations involved might not be as evident.

To help conceptualize these issues, it is useful to reemphasize that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's model properly put the

curatorial "object" at the center of the *in-context/in-situ* schema. In *Tradition*, Edward Shils noted that "physical artifacts and intellectual things stand at diametrically opposed corners of a square."⁸ For Shils, these "intellectual things" included knowledge, interpretation, and other symbolic constructs. Although Shils was not explicit about the exact appearance of such a square, his observation aligns broadly with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's — and, in fact, her schema suggests how a diagrammatic expansion of Shils's "square" might be accomplished.

By pushing Shils's insight and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's model in directions not pursued by either author, it is possible to unify these observations in the form of a semiotic square, a powerful tool for mapping sets of terms with similar constraints and contradictions. Particularly in the form developed by Fredric Jameson, the device can be understood as a way to map thought constraints expressible at any particular moment only very indirectly in cultural production.⁹ If Dubai's house museums are essentially unconscious symptomatic constructs, it should then be possible to map their underlying conceptual structure using this semiotic device. This should in turn provide a sense of what these museums, taken together, structurally imply — although, it must be said, not necessarily what is more broadly possible for museums of this type.

To this end, we can position Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's *in-situ* and *in-context* approaches as an initial pair forming two legs of a semiotic rectangle centered on object presence (FIG. 1). In this formation, the meaning of the object is assumed to be provided, on the one hand, by curatorial interpretation (a specific form of Shils's "symbolic construction"), and on the other by integration into the object's proper physical environment. This is, after all, the pairing that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett rightly identified as fundamental to the museum enterprise. The lower (so-called "neuter") axis (which we claim summarizes the core condition of the house museums in Dubai) then would comprise the derivative terms *not-interpretation* and *not-object*. Following the logic of the semiotic square, these four corners would also represent the fundamental conceptual poles of the museological enterprise.

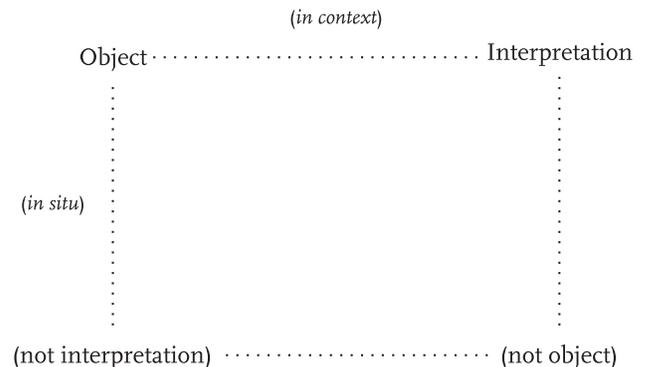


FIGURE 1. Basic semiotic logic: in-context and in-situ approaches.

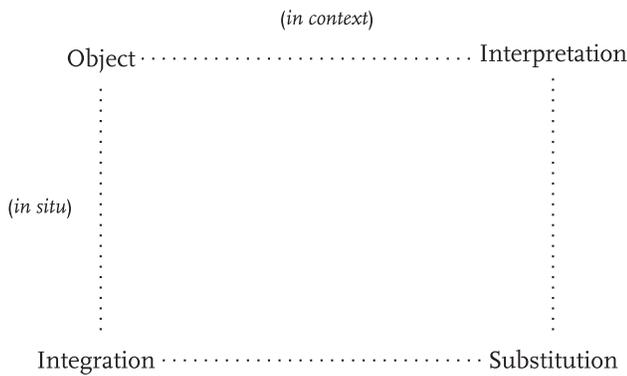


FIGURE 2. Basic semiotic square: development of integration-substitution axis.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has already described what we are calling (in this more semiotic approach) *not-interpretation* as simply *integration* (into a site). Thus it is possible to label the three corners implicitly described by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett as *object*, *interpretation*, and *integration*. The semiotic square can then be completed with a term that recognizes the importance of object absence in the house museum. As we will point out, what characterizes the loss of the object in the house museum is a “filling” of that absence with copies, representations and replacements, all of which, for simplicity, we will call *substitutions*. This allows us to complete the rectangle — with debts to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Shils, and Jameson — as shown (FIG. 2).

We will leave a fuller development of this mapping for another time. It should, however, be clear that what we are concerned with in this article is the *integration-substitution* axis at the bottom, which may be interpreted as the defining semiotic opposition of Dubai’s house museums. As we will show, examples of house museums in Dubai variously elaborate the attendant conditions of site embedment and object loss (integration and substitution) into a unique but related semiotic structure.¹⁰ For this reason, we will find it necessary toward the end of this article to produce another semiotic rectangle that captures these conditions more specifically.

Doubtless without the intention to do so, Dubai’s heritage house museums tend to register a profound sense of regret at the passing of events, objects and persons that no museological or conservation magic can return to the fullness of presence. As will become evident from our discussion of specific examples, the very structural conditions of their sites, programs, geneses, and institutional missions make this almost inevitable. First as *buildings*, and only later as *institutions* and *examples* (that is, initially as houses, conceived for entirely nonmuseological and nonexemplary purposes, and only later as museums and heritage objects), they seem uniquely positioned to mark the passing of time. Constrained by location, they must abide in place as cultural,

political, economic and urban changes occur around them. Initially “built” (which suggests some kind of action), they are now “immobilized,” fixed in a condition of passive endurance, which the French term *immeuble* captures perfectly.

The heritage house museum is clearly also overdetermined as a type, in the sense that it carries the burden of being both a museum and a historical artifact. The examples we discuss here have all been identified and documented by the local authorities as important elements in Dubai’s heritage fabric, while each additionally must maintain some sense of “museum-being” in its contemporary contents and functions.¹¹ In each case, the mutual reinforcement of museological intent or strategy and identification with and significance as a historic building cannot be overemphasized. Hilde Hein has commented that institutions of this type typically attempt to restore a unique sense of meaning rooted in specific people and places.¹² Such museums are thus generally expected to give visitors an understanding of both living conditions and important local events. Normally, this is accomplished through the display of objects reflecting a particular time and place. However, unlike historic sites marking important battles or political events, house museums have a very particular “antecedent material life,” which is crucial to the ways they can be understood in the context of a city like Dubai.

Michele Lamprakos has noted that the family home is a “fundamental institution” in Arab culture, representing the “unity and permanence of a lineage.”¹³ Although her discussion focused on Yemen and “the south of the Arabian Peninsula,” the notion of family, lineage, and the centrality of the home can surely be extended to the south coast of the Arabian Gulf. In such a viewer-reception context there will clearly be an expectation that the heritage house museum remain in some way sensitive to the lives of those who occupied it, as well as to the artifacts that supported the family life that unfolded there. It is therefore not only their location as heritage artifacts in an urban field that lends these house museums a potentially meaningful sense of stability and continuity, but also the expectation that they will offer connections back into time for a life that continues to center around the family home. Raban was certainly right to note that the Arab household is in some way “inward-looking” — and indeed to connect this directly with the physical home and its walls, doors, and other “essential ingredients.” It also follows that a deeply interwoven sense of family, home and house, within a broader urge for heritage continuity, puts a special burden on the house museums.

Beyond site emplacement and positional continuity in a rapidly evolving urban context, then, these museums might be expected to display artifacts and material traces linked directly to the family lives the buildings once supported. However, these museums tend toward the use of secondary visual renderings, ambiguous support materials, and nonspecific artifacts that bear little relation to the buildings themselves,

their histories, or the lives of their former occupants. In fact, radically new urban contexts and prospects resulting from the transformation of Dubai in recent decades as well as the intentional use of general cultural artifacts (stamps, coins, etc.) combine to give these house museums a highly contrived sense of physical *in-situ* embedment. At the same time, the copious collections of photographs, letters and mementos in many of them stand as *in-context* substitutions or reproductions that seek to compensate for fundamentally missing objects — a life, a biography, a living presence, an organically integrated urban object — all now adrift in a new world.

Such strategies, essentially comprising embedment in an original and real but now radically transformed environment, coupled with persuasive substitution and simulation through secondary reproductions, reenactments, and physical traces, create unwitting vehicles for melancholic lament. It is this very surfeit of evidence that unintentionally introduces the evidential doubt on which our “case” will be made.

DUBAI'S RESIDENTIAL HERITAGE

Dubai is sometimes admired, more often vilified, for its contemporary urban landscape. The city has certainly changed since the time of Raban's visit in the 1970s. Among other things, his *Arabia* documented a moment when it still seemed possible to appreciate the place without irony.¹⁴ As the title of his memoir suggests, Raban was interested in the culture of the Gulf in general, but the courtyard houses of Dubai Creek made a special impression on him. His brief insights into these mansions also captured poetically what we might call an analytic truth not only about them, but also about their iconic status in the present-day city and their transformation into local museums and heritage objects.

Formally, the Dubai heritage mansions are characterized by linked series of spaces gathered around courtyards, with both interior and exterior areas largely screened from the public realm. While these merchant mansions were largely ignored until the mid-1990s (with some falling into a state of disrepair so serious they had to be demolished in the 1980s), many of their general features have been mimicked in the new resorts and shopping malls for which Dubai is famous. These developments have appropriated the wind towers (*barjeel*), adobe-like textures, and surface treatments of the mansions as architectural symbols of tradition and authenticity. Indeed, Dubai's luxury tourist venues — Meena al-Salam, Al-Qasr in Jumeirah, the Miraj Hotel, and the Palm Islands, for example — offer entertainment and diversion within faux-historical environments successfully built upon images of cultural authenticity and a superficial sense of local immersion. The most extreme of these spectacles is, of course, Dubai Mall, which includes one of the largest aquariums in the world, large bookstores, neotraditional gold bazaars, and a complete re-created “streetscape” under a retractable roof.

Characteristically, these developments bypass and separate themselves from real public space to sanitize cultural experience and facilitate its uncritical consumption. Festival City Mall and the Al-Jumeirah resort go so far as to incorporate waterways and offer tourist boat rides in a fully artificial context that seeks to replicate the look and activity of Dubai Creek. By contrast, the actual historical waterway retains a lively, if messy and potentially alienating, commercial vitality and sense of connection to past mercantile practices. The Creek registers this past through the remains of built heritage along its banks — some of it carefully restored, as in the case of the textile souq (FIG. 3). The persistence of traditional mercantile and supply activities along Dubai Creek avoids both the artificial quasi-historical reconstruction intended to appeal to holiday



FIGURE 3. Dubai's textile bazaar.

tourists as well as the lifeless aesthetic preservation of interest to a more limited audience of well-informed cultural tourists.

THE HOUSE MUSEUM IN DUBAI

Despite popular perceptions, Dubai's built heritage includes a residential fabric that was intertwined over many generations with the mercantile activities of Arabian Gulf trading families. The textile souq and the various commercial activities that remain along Dubai Creek were thus once complemented by limited areas of residential fabric whose history stretches back to the mid-nineteenth century. Deira, where many of Dubai's courtyard mansions are located, still retains something of this original character. It once comprised an intricate and densely populated social geography overlaid by a network of narrow, intertwining passages facilitating pedestrian movement. Within this context, Dubai's historic mansions functioned both as mercantile spaces and as residences for tight-knit families, where the residential upper floors were virtually sealed off both from the noisy bazaar areas on the ground floor and the public life of the street outside.

In *Arabia*, Raban described the presence of an Indo-Perian merchant community, and he identified their architectural culture both with the wind towers (*barjeel*) used to cool interior spaces in the summer and with the floral and vegetal ornamentation used to adorn stucco walls. Raban also noted that surrounding areas of Deira were characterized by restaurants and advertisements for merchandise and films that appealed to Indians, Iranians, Pakistanis, and non-Gulf Arabs. His descriptions thus reflect how Deira was historically home to a complex multicultural community, of a type that the contemporary simulacra of Jumeirah, Festival City, and the Miraj effectively erase in favor of simplified faux-historical re-creations.

As did the Dubai Creek textile souq, Deira's remaining merchant residences attracted the interest of heritage-minded citizens and government departments, especially the Historic Buildings Section of Dubai Municipality. The Al-Shindagha and Deira quarters in which these residences are located have been slowly transformed over the past two decades into museum districts. Yet, while the physical heritage has thus been at least partially preserved by government-sponsored renovation, the districts themselves and the new museums established in their restored houses remain largely unvisited. This has had much to do with the lack of attention paid to the contents of the museums; it has also had to do with competition from the city's flashier quasi-historical faux-heritage complexes. However, in contrast to both these types of environment, Dubai's historic textile bazaar retains much more of the authentic sense of activity and social importance described by Raban in *Arabia*. Indeed, it remains a multiethnic, multilingual indoor-outdoor space of social and commercial exchange. It also remains vibrant into the night, long after much of the rest of the city has retired.

As mentioned already, the mansions in the Al-Shindagha and Deira districts were originally built for merchant families requiring commercial outposts on the Dubai coast. But as part of their transformation into small museums documenting Dubai's history and culture, they have typically been stripped down to their foundations and very substantially rebuilt. This work has tended to carefully incorporate and expose fragments of their original coral/stone walls, doorways, and access stairs — giving a visual suggestion of authenticity without the need to maintain much of the original building fabric. Meanwhile, their interiors have been decorated without much regard to original furnishings, period tastes, or other material supports for the preservation of tradition and historical memory.

Largely devoid of ornament, practical, simple and elegant, these renovated buildings are indeed attractive urban objects. Isolated from the hectic city, their interiors are typically warm and inviting, with surface colorings that tend to reinforce the sense of their residential past. At the same time, they have often been entirely reconfigured to suit contemporary needs, their spatial redesign constrained only by their original structural patterns. For example, windows to the outside have frequently been filled in to produce blind display niches, while neon lighting has been used to highlight overall building form while throwing their surrounding context into shadow. Such modifications substantially limit a visitor's sense of the environment in which these houses once stood, as well as any feeling for the relation between the former interior life of the house and the city outside. Even where a traditional *majlis* with low-rise cushioned seating may still be present (where visitors may sample Arabic coffee with dates), no audio-visual narration or other information is provided to give a sense of the social life or official events that may once have taken place there. As presented in its house museums, Dubai's vernacular heritage is essentially flattened, reduced to a collection of structural envelopes inside which familiarity, comfort and entertainment trump history, memory and tradition.

On one level, these conditions are perhaps only another variation of the strategy of entertainment and artificiality seen in Dubai's faux-historical shopping malls and theme resorts. However, when the effect of Dubai's house museums is considered as a whole, they may be seen to constitute something like a closed conceptual system at odds with the exuberance and optimism of Dubai's high-profile commercial developments. Before we make this argument, however, we will first describe the specific features of a few of the most important of these house museums. As we mentioned, our interest here is not to criticize the houses or castigate their renovators for some purposeful "failure" to be true to the past. Rather, it is to see how the treatment of these houses and the experiential effects they produce offer insights into Dubai that would be difficult to arrive at otherwise.

FIGURE 4. *Sheikh Saeed heritage house.*



SHEIKH SAEED BIN MAKTOUM MUSEUM

The museum of Sheikh Saeed bin Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai between 1912 and 1958, is a classic example of a reconstructed heritage house transformed into a local museum (FIG. 4). Inside, chronological displays of archival photographs, primarily from the oeuvres of Ronald Codrai and Wilfred Theisiger, depict both official meetings involving Sheikh Saeed and typical social events of the times. The images impart a tone of authenticity and seriousness to the museum. Various curatorial themes are then developed against the images, divided by spatial zone within the house. These include the history of Dubai between 1948 and 1953; the marine life of the local waters; pearl-diving and coastal trade; ethnic dress; and coins, stamps, maps and jewelry typical of Dubai and its environs.

The museum presents a broad and multifaceted vision of life in Dubai, impressing upon visitors the richness and variety of its heritage. This is reinforced by glimpses of the city from upper-floor terraces that overlook Dubai Creek. In this sense, the museum “prepares” visitors to see the city as a contemporary and living correlate of its curated collections. However, even as the diversity of Dubai’s architectural heritage and cultural and ethnic mix “appears” here, a quiet form of “disappearance” is also at work. Specifically, at the same time that the Sheikh Saeed Museum reinforces a general historical and cultural sensibility, the person of Sheikh Saeed recedes from view. The emphasis on the general view inevitably draws attention away from the biographical details of the museum’s benefactor and namesake. And this sense of faded attention is reinforced by the explicit curatorial strategy of limiting explanation to copper labels that briefly identify key

facts related to objects displayed and the names of the people depicted in photographs. The foreclosure of personal and biographical context embodied in the decision not to elaborate on the photographic framing or the situations depicted creates a mode of reception characterized by loss and incompleteness, a sense that is essentially melancholic. Museum visitors are thus initially offered a heightened sense of the availability of the objects and people that form the subjects of display, but this intimation of presence is immediately undercut by a sense of unmooring or loss. The sense of presence and availability visitors come away with is thus sufficient only to point to what remains absent and apparently unrecoverable.

This steady erosion of the sense of personal biography — a focus which might otherwise be expected in such a museum (and, indeed, which is announced in the museum’s name itself) — is furthered by the architectural treatment undertaken to renovate the house into a museum. The most obvious feature of this building are the varying shapes of niches, solid walls, and wind towers that function aesthetically to break up the monotony of solid facades. But these devices also once created specific qualities within a living residence — that is, views out, daylight in, and the circulation of fresh air. These original uses have been largely supplanted in the restoration by museological ones, in which object display is the paramount value (for example, using blind niches to display items from the museum’s collections). Proper understanding of the original functions of these building elements is also suppressed by a formal strategy of dramatic interior and exterior lighting, which presents the house as an object of aesthetic contemplation rather than a setting for personal, familial and official life.

In the courtyard of the Sheikh Saeed Museum, exterior flood and spot lighting focuses attention on the beauty of the seven arched stucco panels in the blind niches of an otherwise plain structure. Indeed, the general quality of the illumination, combined with the effects of paint and wall surface, frequently makes it appear as if the light were emerging from within windows, niches and *barjeel*, rather than being projected on them from outside. This so-called boutique lighting, which has recently become popular with heritage restoration committees, tends to heighten the visitor's sense of the raw physicality of a building as an object. Stephan Greenblatt has argued that this form of lighting suggests the building as a form of "wonder."¹⁵ Such a strategy, which sets the building apart from its context, history, and everyday reality, are typical of the Dubai heritage house museums.

Core circulation patterns in the house now occupied by the Sheikh Saeed Museum were the result of unplanned growth and spatial adaptation over the many years that it served as a residence. Typically, a labyrinthine spatial pattern emerged as families grew and more rooms were added. In this instance, corridors, pathways and staircases leading to upper rooms were typically accompanied by colonnades (*liwans*) originally adapted for use as meeting spaces. Overall, this produced an effect of continuous commerce between exterior and interior space. These *liwans* today typically open to rectangular rooms that house displays of pictures, stamps, local jewelry, and documents, with contemporary models of traditional dhows positioned as spatial centerpieces. But many of the original openings from these rooms to the outside have been blocked to create interior niches that recall and complement the blind niches that appear on the building's exterior (FIG. 5).

Where openings remain unblocked, objects displayed near windows appear against relatively bright backgrounds,



FIGURE 5. Coin collection in blind niches at the Sheikh Saeed Museum.

a strategy that tends to increase ambient reflection and suppress much of the objects' detail and color.¹⁶ As with the cryptic copper labels used to identify, but not explain, objects and images, such lighting decisions bleed specificity out of the displayed collection — just as the exterior lighting and renovation at once highlight the presence of the architectural object while downplaying its genesis and historical use. The overall effect is a sense of abstraction and loss, as attention is focused on collected objects, depicted events, and building fabrics, and away from the social, personal and cultural meanings of these very things. The final effect of this strategy is to render the ostensible object of the museum — the life, being and times of Sheikh Saeed bin Maktoum — present, after a fashion, but only as a specter glimpsed in the washed-out spaces, objects, and relics of a life now gone.

This dual appearance and disappearance is perhaps unsurprising in biographical museums, where the institutional need is to paint a picture of museological fullness, but in the context of primary loss (in this case the irredeemable disappearance of the biographical subject himself). In this case, precisely because the museum is housed in Sheikh Saeed's "house" and carries his name, the abundance of general cultural artifacts and images related to Dubai and the Emirates are never enough to dispel the sense of absence that pervades the museum and the artifacts and images of its collections. In the end, Sheikh Saeed remains something like a *revenant* — indicated, simulated and substituted though the objects of "his" collections — neither fully present nor completely gone. In the same way, the house museum remains embedded in its local urban context, but now renovated beyond recognition as a piece of living architectural history.

AL-SIRAAJ GALLERY, OBAID AND JUMAA BIN THANI HOUSE

A more oblique mode of dealing with restored heritage is evident at the Al-Siraj Gallery, located in the former house of Obaid and Jumaa bin Thani. This institution displays specific interpretations of Islam via graphic representations that transcend local and cultural boundaries. The gallery is popular, its success relying in part on the building's location in a busy area with significant foot traffic. On its first floor visitors are taken through a series of rooms that form what is essentially an Islamic pilgrimage route. These open with what are considered the scientific miracles of the *Qur'an*, then move through retellings of the creation of the universe, the messages and messengers of Islam, and the meaning and importance of the "last message." The second floor of the courtyard house continues this narrative, through exhibitions entitled "Judgment," "Eternal Bliss," and "Eternal Damnation." It is important to note that both the message delivered and the media used to do so are alien to the physical envelope of the Emirati house and to local Islamic tradition. The gal-

lery instead promotes a very particular and codified expression of Islam through its graphics and brochures, as well as through seminars delivered on a temporary stage in the center of the courtyard. The original function of the house as a vernacular setting for domestic life has been changed to that of a center for religious teaching, whose message is overwhelmingly shaped by curatorial intent.

The view of Arab culture and Islam presented in the gallery also surely never existed in Dubai in anything like the pure form suggested. In a multiethnic port city, which relied for centuries for commercial survival on the practical accommodation of multiple cultures and various religious traditions, this was simply not possible. Nevertheless, to produce its message, the gallery employs many of the same effects relied upon in Dubai's other heritage mansions. This includes wrapping the house and covering its wall surfaces with overpowering multimedia displays that effectively erode any sense of it as a material object with its own presence and meaning (FIG. 6). Local history is thus scrubbed off, whitewashed and overwritten, and the house becomes a fresh billboard on which a new visual narrative, and not the historical substrate or support space around which it unfolds, is dominant.

In fact, the house of Obaid and Jumaa bin Thani, built in 1917, is historically important as one of the first houses to reflect the prosperity of the Al Shindagha area at a time when the local pearl trade was flourishing. But in its repurposing not only have specific references to such a local culture been suppressed, but all traces of a life, a family, a social reality, the vicissitudes of economic fortune, the drama of political intrigue, and the simple evidence of everyday use have been relentlessly erased. Together, these qualities underwrite the practical meaning and historical importance of such a house, particularly in this cultural context. But the gallery's powerful media, images, and reproduced textures crowd out any sense of collective memory that might have been triggered by less intrusive insertions, and the displays fatally obscure the intrinsic architectural character and original function of the house.

The setting of the house is also crucial to understanding its meaning, both now and in the past. Local people, their shops, crafts, customs, and the commercial activities of the bazaar nearby are all part of its site context. But these, too, are overpowered by the display function of the exhibition, and its site appears as little more than scaffold and catchment for the ideological efforts of the gallery. In other words, the Al-Siraaj Gallery utilizes the physical integration of the house with its context to support visitor traffic, but it refuses any recognition that its physical setting is a large part of what gives it both historical and contemporary meaning.

In this example, then, the house remains embedded as a physical object within its context, but no effort is expended to link it in meaningful and particular ways to the urban fabric around it. At the same time, the original uses of the building as a dwelling, as well as all signs of domestic occupancy and



FIGURE 6. The Al-Siraaj Gallery in the house of Obaid and Jumaa bin Thani.

local importance, have been suppressed. As a consequence, the house, as an object, suffers an extraordinary erosion of historical meaning. Indeed, this erasure of historical traces is more thorough than in the case of the Sheikh Saeed Museum — even if both houses remain in different ways embedded in the urban fabric.

DUBAI NATIONAL MUSEUM

The popular Dubai National Museum complex is built around one of the oldest structures in Dubai, the Al-Fahidi fort. Dating to 1787, the fort was first restored in 1971, and then again 1995. The present museum is divided into two sections — the historical fort above ground and a more recent underground structure designed by the British architectural firm Makiya Associates. Above ground, the interior walls of the Al-Fahidi fort are used to display artifacts from life in Dubai before the petroleum era, including examples of historical weaponry. The fort's courtyard also contains a tra-

ditional dhow, old cannons, a reed wind tower (*barjeel*), and a reconstructed palm-frond room (*areej*). By contrast, the new halls of the underground section lead visitors through a carefully orchestrated history of Dubai. First comes a display of wooden doors and stucco molds similar to those at the Sheikh Saeed Museum. But these are soon followed by digital projections illustrating Dubai's extraordinary urban expansion between 1960 and 1980. The goal is to allow visitors to compare the past and present and gain a feeling for the growth of the city over time. While not strictly a "house museum," this area is in every sense a museum of domesticity, just as the fort above retains its original scale and character as the fortified residence of an extended family.

One of the most remarkable features of the darkened underground rooms (in addition to their sophisticated audiovisual displays) is the use of mannequins dressed in local garments to present a sense of past social life. These figures are frequently deployed as part of full-size dioramas that replicate typical historical scenes — such as girls with local hairstyles and jewelry reciting the *Qur'an*, pearl traders at work, desert vistas with real sand, and water canals (*falaj*). The dioramas are complemented by short films, recorded music, period rooms, and archeological fragments. Many of Ronald Codrai's mid-century period photos have been used as references.¹⁷ For example, the diorama of girls celebrating their graduation from a *Qur'an* school provides a faithful three-dimensional reproduction of one of his most well-known photos. Together, these displays provide a selective and highly romantic image of past life in the Emirates.

The co-presence under low light conditions of mannequins and museum visitors — many themselves dressed in traditional clothing — has the additional effect of "animating" the otherwise static displays and suggesting a merging of identity (FIG. 7). This powerful effect is reinforced by the absence of spatial separation between visitors and displays



FIGURE 7. Mannequins and visitors at the Dubai National Museum.

(FIG. 8). Here, both "audience" and "actors" share the same stage. Perhaps partly because of the reliance on Codrai's photographs, the exhibition tends to focus exclusively, however, on local Arab culture, and specifically that of the Bedouins. Other ethnic communities that have coexisted in the area for centuries, such as Indians and Persians, as well as representatives of other Islamic traditions, such as Sufis, are largely ignored.

The effect of intermixing display figures and real visitors in the darkened exhibition spaces further obscures the histories that have been edited out. As such, it provides another reminder, if one were necessary, of the extraordinary ideological power of representation and displacement. Thus, while the National Museum uses similar strategies as those employed at the Sheikh Saeed Museum, its underground chambers and the production of a new aboveground display space suggest something more like "extraction" from an authentic site than the embedment and integration evident both at the Sheikh Saeed Museum and the Al-Siraaj Gallery. Effectively, the museum has been figuratively lifted out of (and, more literally, dropped below) its nominal site to become a theatrical realm all its own.

MAJLIS GALLERY, MIR ABDULLAH AMIRI HOUSE

The house of Mir Abdullah Amiri, now the "Majlis Gallery," is considered to be the oldest art gallery in Dubai, and both the house itself and its walled garden, planted with bougainvillea and henna, have undergone several restorations. The original house was built in 1945 by Abdullah Hassan Awadhi, and for a number of years it served as a caravanserai for guests from Oman, Bahrain, Lingeh and Qatar, including the Sheikh of Dibba and his entourage. However, in 1957 Abdullah Hassan Awadhi sold it to Mir Abdullah Amiri, who later partnered with Alison Collins to transform it into the Majlis Gallery.



FIGURE 8. Bedouin life exhibition with visitors at the Dubai Museum.

The Amiri family moved out in 1973, and the house became a rental property. Following an eviction order from the Dubai Municipality in 1988, a restoration was then carried out by the architect Dariush Zandi in the spring of 1989. The gallery was open between 1989 and 1998, before the house was again renovated in 1999 and reopened that same year.¹⁸

In its reincarnation as a gallery, the Mir Abdullah Amiri house is perhaps the most extreme example of a heritage house treated almost purely as an object without history, context or meaning beyond its function as a scaffold for the display of collectible objects. This quality is reinforced by the gallery's location in a tourist district that no longer supports the specific activities from which the original house drew its public presence. Exterior lighting is an important aspect of this strategy of objectification in the Majlis Gallery. The effects described with regard to the Sheikh Saeed Museum are all compounded. Indeed, at night it seems the goal is to suggest a magical or unearthly object with little relation to the quotidian world (FIG. 9).

Inside, meanwhile, house features have become little more than supports or frames for the display of artwork on sale. And what were once openings out of which family members could glimpse the surrounding street life, and through which sunlight could flood the house, have been filled in and converted to display niches (FIG. 10). Virtually all the interior walls, which would originally have been mostly bare, have been used to display areas for paintings and other two-dimensional works, deeply compromising any sense of spatial articulation or structural support in the process (FIG. 11). Even the wind tower, perhaps the single most important heritage element in a classic Dubai mansion, has been appropriated for lighting, obscuring its original purpose as a ventilation device (FIG. 12). No longer is there even a pretense that original spatial uses, historical events, or period objects have a place in the restored structure. And the constant rotation of artwork on temporary display only reinforces the sense that this house is



FIGURE 9. Boutique lighting at the Majlis Gallery.



FIGURE 10. Walls with display niches at the Majlis Gallery.

no longer a place with a meaningful residential heritage.

The combined effect of the erosion of historical meanings (as at the Al-Siraaj Gallery) and the overshadowing of location by means of lighting effects (as described by Greenblatt) effectively extracts the Mir Abdullah Amiri house from its site — particularly at night when it seems completely removed from everyday life. In this sense, the effect is similar



FIGURE 11. Walls with picture display at the Majlis Gallery.



FIGURE 12. Wind tower used for gallery lighting at the Majlis Gallery.

to that of the Dubai National Museum, which was isolated from its surroundings by being sited largely underground. Indeed, the changes wrought by the Majlis Gallery have turned the Mir Abdullah Amiri house into something closer to an independent cabinet or chest for the storage and display of precious objects. It is more a box made up of surfaces and compartments than a historical dwelling.

Perhaps, given the commercial and practical demands that accompany a business like that of the Majlis Gallery, none of this should be surprising. What should be surprising, however, is that the Mir Abdullah Amiri house, even in its new use, is still considered meaningful — in fact, exemplary — as a piece of heritage conservation. As such, it surely comprises an essential element in how heritage is construed and presented in Dubai.¹⁹

HERITAGE HOUSES AND THE MEANING OF TRADITION

It should be clear by now that the senses of history, tradition and meaning embodied in the Dubai heritage house museums are not as straightforward as those portrayed by the restoration of the textile souq. As mentioned earlier, the souq

both preserves a feature of the city's historic built fabric and sustains contemporary versions of bartering and provisioning from the city's past. The most obvious difference between this approach and that of the heritage house museums is the predominance in the latter of various substitutions, simulations and distractions that stand in for real objects and traces of past life. Seen in a larger historical context, this movement from authentic trace and artifact toward replacement, simulation and fabrication is wholly consistent with the third stage of Nezar AlSayyad's periodization of heritage and tradition, in which under conditions of globalization the manufacture and consumption of history is now dominant.²⁰ What is interesting in the heritage house museums, however, is that what Khaled Adham has called "an industry of 'authenticity,'" present most obviously in Dubai theme resorts and malls, is almost entirely missing.²¹ There is very little drive toward a sustained reinvention of tradition in the heritage house museums. This is perhaps the first indication that these houses cannot be dismissed simply as failed museums or flawed reconstructions.

Howayda Al-Harithy has suggested that the preservation of heritage should both be engaged with local populations in meaningful ways and be integrally linked to contemporary cultural, social and economic contexts.²² In this light, it is essential to ask whether a "failure" to reinforce a sense of tradition is necessarily a failure to provide an authentic link to the "context of [the] living city" and its "present dynamics." In other words, are the losses and absences evident in Dubai's heritage house museums simply failures of purpose and execution? Or are they authentic "symptomatic" renderings of a living condition that can be expressed in no other way? We are, of course, suggesting the latter.

Al-Harithy has suggested that a city's monuments be understood as Derridean "open texts," as vehicles for the "creative regeneration of meaning."²³ This view effectively radicalizes Edward Shils's belief that what is most characteristic of tradition is its reinvention and rearticulation.²⁴ Dubai's heritage house museums may thus be best understood as oblique readings of Dubai's contemporary condition — heritage elements of present importance and unexpected new meaning. But they are also material indicators of a trans-historical condition peculiar to the museum, and to heritage enterprises generally; and, as such, they are perhaps not unique. But it is largely because of their appearance in the context of a city such as Dubai that their implications can be seen so clearly.

SEMIOTICS OF THE HERITAGE HOUSE

At this point, it is convenient to reframe our observation that Dubai's heritage houses are characterized by site embedment and secondary substitutional or representational strategies. These characteristics may be identified as core terms in the pairing introduced earlier (following Kirshenblatt-Gimblett,

Shils, and Jameson) as *integration-substitution*. In combination, we believe this captures the essential features of these heritage house museums. The implication of this, of course, is that the house museum is fundamentally conditioned by *loss* (of an original object) and *compensation* (via substitution, replication or representation). All this takes place in the context of embedment in an originary site.

To put this another way, the expanded institutional term “house museum” is necessarily characterized by the simultaneous recognition of and resistance to a primary loss, in this case the absence of the “object” of its historiography, its very *raison d'être*. In the example of the Dubai heritage house, this takes the form of the life events and personal qualities of the historical figure that the museum seeks to preserve and explain. This is essentially an institutional instance of the melancholy typical of any historical understanding, predicated on objects or traces displayed in a context of limited explanation. Such melancholy is compounded here with a sense of irrecoverable loss of any authentic fullness, and its compensation through simulation, representation and substitution.

Without the possibility of a primary object embedded in a fully recoverable context, any such historical understanding must avail itself of what Donald Preziosi has called “rememberment.” This essentially involves the production of meaning through various strategies of compensation and replacement for the “dis-memberment” of meaning that inevitably accompanies temporal change and the partial set of artifacts, fragments and traces it leaves in its wake.²⁵ Indeed, this sense of melancholy in the face of loss is pervasive and all consuming in the house museums of Dubai — a point we will come back to shortly.

In order to make this a little clearer, the four key Dubai local/house museums discussed above can be grouped in a single conceptual structure, elaborated from the basic diagram of museum types introduced earlier. The second semiotic square can be used to map and relate together the heritage house variations evident in Dubai. In particular, it can help make sense of house museum variations that might otherwise remain puzzling, such as the Dubai National Museum extension, which at first hardly appears to be a “house.” It is also useful in understanding display-oriented heritage mansions such as the Majlis Gallery, which appear at best only weakly related to museum types.

This extension recognizes that the examples here are best understood as varying ways of addressing the loss and melancholy initially implied in the *integration-substitution* axis of a basic semiotic square. In a similar operation to that outlined earlier (by which the Kirshenblatt-Gimblett *in-context/in-situ* schema was elaborated into a semiotic rectangle, producing *integration-substitution* on its neuter axis), the new square may be constituted by using the *integration-substitution* pairing as the primary opposition of a new but related structure. Indeed, the museological strategies seen in these various house museums all derive from this core pairing.

Specifically, the initial oppositions deriving from *integration* and *substitution* generate two further terms along the neuter axis: *extraction* (not-integration — in this case a “pure” building object independent of site); and *erosion* (not-substitution — in this case the suppression or removal of object/contents rather than their simulation or replacement). This basic logic can be mapped as shown (FIG. 13).

It should be noted that this semiotic tool can be used only loosely to map the specific heritage house museums. While this approach allows a general mapping of the basic terms at play, the specific examples can be placed in the diagram only indicatively. In other words, none of the house museums discussed here can be seen to neatly or definitively occupy a single pair of vertex terms, but each does tend to emphasize one pairing over another. What will be clear, however, is that the basic semiotic structure accommodates the overall house museum dynamic extremely well. The real question is, why?

In a general sense, the Dubai house museums discussed here can be understood as approximate examples of four general types, or approaches, comprising the expanded field of this basic conceptual structure. On the *integration-substitution* axis, the Sheikh Saeed bin Maktoum Museum is a form of “biographical museum.” This provides an essentially “affirmative” recognition of the loss that characterizes both the disappearance of a subject and a secondary rendering through representations of a “life.” On the *integration-erosion* axis, the Al-Siraaj Gallery takes the form of an explicitly “evacuated house.” This represents an essentially “opportunistic,” often ideological, and sometimes violent approach to an architectural object embedded in a site context, where all evidence of the object’s original function, use and occupancy are removed or suppressed. On the *substitution-extraction* axis, the underground extension of the Dubai National museum makes use of new, “siteless” construction. This is essentially a “realistic” approach to the loss of meaningful historical sites, but one which accommodates the internal representation of previous moments in time. On the *erosion-extraction* axis, the Majlis Gallery in the Mir Abdullah Amiri house is



FIGURE 13. Basic semiotic square: integration, substitution, erosion, extraction.

refocuses attention on the “world that melancholia perceives as fragmented and ruined.”³⁰ But isn't this precisely the condition the residents and visitors to Dubai encounter, albeit much less explicitly, in the malls, resorts, and entertainment venues that dominate the city? Paul Gilroy's identification of the “unkempt, unruly and unplanned multicultural” of contemporary life and its attendant cross-contamination and loss of identity suggests that in a city such as Dubai, characterized by an extraordinarily diverse and fluid population, any tendency to melancholy would only be intensified.³¹ For Pensky, however, it is precisely when it is possible to “harness the historical and personal forces that define [one's] sorrow,” that it is possible to render oneself whole. He identified such a revelation as a “victory” over melancholia. But, of course, such a victory requires that the conditions to which melancholy is so closely attuned be made unmistakably apparent. In her 1989 book *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholy*, Julia Kristeva quoted the French novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline: “We need the greatest possible sorrow precisely to become fully ourselves.”³² In the end, this is the power of Dubai's heritage house museums.

The conditions of loss that constitute these houses are lived in various ways by everyone who visits them. Tourists, expatriate workers, and local citizens all experience physical and social dislocations, linguistic and cultural displacements, and various senses of diaspora and dispossession. We can all recognize that we are not alone in this, as loss and absence inevitably accompany the passage of time under modernity. But these conditions are extreme in a city like Dubai. Dubai's heritage house museums at once acknowledge, expose and redeem this general condition, offering the possibility of facing it and “rendering ourselves whole.” If, as Kristeva noted, melancholy is beholden to the dream of a “past that does not pass by,” the melancholic houses of Dubai demonstrate just how futile this dream of stasis must be. Kristeva's book took its title from the poet Gerard de Nerval. In his poem “The Disinherited,” Nerval's own melancholy was no less than a terrible new sun, “bright and black at the same time.”³³ As might be expected, however, even when its light is black, this star provides a uniquely fitting form of illumination.

In its own way, Jonathan Raban's description of the Dubai Creek houses from decades ago beautifully captures this condition and its most profound implications. As he anticipated in *Arabia*, the decay and erosion of individual examples of house heritage in Dubai open onto a deeply troubling matrix of historico-museological approaches characterized equally by melancholy and violence. These are the local fruits, it might be said, of an implicit recognition of irretrievable loss coupled with the broadly pervasive instrumentality typical of Dubai's urban and architectural development. This is indeed a logic of “passing glimpses,” as Raban noted — not only in the sense of sights (and sites) barely seen, but also in the sense that even these few glimpses have begun to pass, as Dubai's urban fabric continues to be relentlessly developed, and redeveloped, under political and capital forces largely un-

responsive to demands for civic or corporate responsibility to history, heritage, and cultural continuity. We could say that the evident scopophilia driving Raban's description of Dubai's ruined houses has now been augmented by an organized “praxifilia” of incessant urban change.

This is not the melancholy of ruin and remembrance that Pamuk found in Istanbul — although when Raban saw the traditional courtyard houses of Dubai as “cubes of burnt pastry,” he explicitly remarked on the ruin wrought by the passage of time and the desert sun. Raban also appears to have sensed in these houses the emptiness and fading of meaning now recognizable as the shadows of a black sun all Dubai's own. The reconstructed house museums of Dubai together map a melancholy of hollowing out, erasure and loss, of “restoration” serving various heritage, historical and hagiographic agendas, but one largely bereft of so much of the meaning they promise in their completeness and fullness of content. Paradoxically, the presence of these heritage objects has become the very ground against which loss, emptiness and absence can now be registered. Indeed, just as for Pamuk the Bosphorus mansions figured the special melancholy of Istanbul, the heritage mansions of Dubai — in restoration, reconstruction and reuse — capture that city's own melancholy, rooted in rapid structural change, but also in the personal experiences of diaspora, distance, loss and dislocation experienced by Dubai's current residents.

Lest it be thought that this sense of anomie and rootedness is the problem of migrant workers and temporary residents alone — for whom it is certainly acute — the obvious weakening of local varieties of Arabic, increasing encroachment of cultural norms imported from abroad, a flattening of local identity, and other symptoms of heritage lost are keenly felt by much of the Emirati population. As we have seen, Dubai's house museums perform complex and sometimes contradictory roles involving the simultaneous conservation and homogenization of identity. They also involve the expression and legitimization of standing political rule, as well as more general instantiations and disavowals of intrinsic variation and imposed cultural change. But they seemingly cannot do these things without implicitly remarking on the losses entailed in this process and the sorrows that follow from it.

Obliquely and symptomatically, then, Dubai's heritage houses bring this melancholy to light as it accompanies heritage conservation and urban development in the city's contemporary political, ideological, economic and social contexts. By drawing attention to what has faded, disappeared or suffered excision, they invite, as radically open texts, the very creative regeneration and reinvention that Al-Harithy and Shils have both felt to be crucial for any meaning to history and heritage that can claim to be both contemporary and authentic. These heritage houses suggest not only that the effort to construct such meaning is possible, but also that it is likely to remain as incomplete as it is necessary. In this, perhaps, Dubai has a message for other rapidly developing cities.

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