

Place-Branding and the Public Realm: a Typological Study of Public Spaces at Yas Island, Abu Dhabi

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1 ABSTRACT

As cities worldwide compete to attract human resources and investment, Place Branding has emerged as a key urban development strategy. With the growing importance of tourism as a basis for building and diversifying the economy, Place Branding has played an instrumental role in marking a place as a destination. Creating and promoting the quality of place, lifestyle and availability of opportunities are regarded as critical measures when publicising the competitive advantage of a place.

This research examines the nature of the public realm which is shaped primarily by Place Branding forces in the context of the Yas Island development in Abu Dhabi. The Yas Island, which gained international attention as the venue for the Formula One races in 2009 is also home to several notable attractions such as the Yas Waterworld, Yas Ferrari World and Yas Mall with still others in the pipeline.

The research attempts to identify emerging public space typologies in branded environments such as that of Yas Island. A mixed-method qualitative approach is used to understand the context of the study area, followed by detailed analysis of smaller units of study. A framework for typological analysis of public spaces is proposed in order to discuss both the place characteristics and the network characteristics. In the final section, the paper discusses the need for greater awareness of emerging typologies and reports on findings which highlight areas for improvements in typological characteristics.

2 MAKING PLACES THROUGH PLACE-BRANDING

2.1 Place-Branding – City positioning and image creation

With the intensification of competition between cities in a post-globalized world, place-branding and place-marketing are regarded as critical strategies in publicising a city's competitive advantage (Elshe, A. 2005). Correspondingly, there has been extensive interest in academic research spanning various disciplines. Several terms such as urban-marketing, city-marketing, city-branding, place-branding and place-marketing have been discussed. Van den Berg et al (1990) describe urban marketing as the set of activities intended to optimize the supply of urban functions to the demand from inhabitants, tourists, companies and other stakeholders. Ashworth and Voogd (1990) describe the city-marketing process in terms of consumers, markets and producers and further classify marketing measures as promotional, spatial-functional and organizational. With the growing importance of tourism as a basis for building and diversifying the economy, place-branding has garnered greater interest as a strategic instrument in marking a place as a destination. Literature on destination branding refers to developing and managing tourism destinations as brands to support tourism growth (eg. Morgan et al, 2002).

Kavaratzis (2004) distinguishes city-branding from marketing and describes it as a focus on the communicative aspect of all marketing measures which attempts to create associations with the city. Landscape strategies and infrastructure projects are categorized as primary communicative elements of urban branding (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008). Several authors have discussed the role of architecture and urban design in the creation of an image which is fundamental to branding of places by creating a strong association with a brand. Koetler et al (1993) discuss 4 strategies for place improvement that are the foundations for building a competitive advantage – Design (Place as character); Infrastructure (Place as fixed event); Basic Services (Place as Service provider) and Attractions (Place as entertainment and recreation). In contexts where there is a huge premium on an architecture which conveys the desired image, Sherman (2011) states that 'urbansim has at one level become a form of entertainment' and further suggests that the role of an architect-planner is 'not unlike that of a Disney imagineer' when creating and marketing forms to 'engage the politics of identity'.

Another section in literature studies the nature and effect of place-branding on the physical and social characteristics of places (Evans, 2003). Griffiths (1998) highlights the similarity and uniformity in marketing goals in cities all over the world and the resulting monotonous environments.

Cities around the Arabian Gulf make for interesting cases due to their concentrated efforts to expand their economic base thus making place-branding a focus area for current research. Helmy (2008) presents key literature in developments in the Arab Gulf city, a comparative case study analysis of urban branding in select cities and recommendations for designing the city image in Gulf cities. She discusses the strategy for branding social life through staging of events and festivals which are organized to carry a particular message and engage with the relevant audience. The evolution of Abu Dhabi and the role of branding in particular has also been the subject of examination by Hashim (2012). Ponzini (2011) provides an in-depth analysis of Sadiyat Island and discusses the role of large-scale development and star-architecture as a part of place-branding. Lefebvre and Roullet (2011), while conducting a historical analysis of the F1 circuit expansion phases, recognize the new interest in 'dominant-emerging' cities like Abu Dhabi which are on a 'visibility quest'.

2.2 Place-Branding and the Contemporary Public Realm

Castello (2010) reflects on the complementary nature between place-making and place-marketing with place-marketing having become a modern instrument and constant complement to the process of creating new urban places. These development trends are creating new public space typologies such as event plazas, strongly themed spaces, ceremonial routes etc. which are in turn influencing the public realm. The emerging public realm may be characterized by strong physical expressions of the brand through architectural iconography, creation of places dedicated to consumption of products and services, wide swings in temporal use of spaces and singularity or reduced diversity in activities and users.

A review of literature on emerging public realm in branded environments needs also to be discussed in a wider context of critiques on the contemporary public space. Carmona (2010) comprehensively summarises these diverse critiques and highlights the role of the management aspect of these spaces in categorising the critiques. While acknowledging the heavy criticism on privatisation and commercialisation of public spaces, he also discusses counter-critiques to this view, which can help expand the academic perspective from which public space is discussed.

While traditionally, streets, squares and gardens have been considered as examples of public space, several critics have observed that these typologies do not fully address contemporary realities of social life. Cooper (1989) remarks that new times appropriate new places and new modes of spending time in them and stresses the importance of the emergence of these new shared places to encourage their potential contribution to public life. Gehl and Gemzoe (1989, 2001) discuss the changing nature of public spaces and cite malls, arcades, atria, festival markets, underground cities and skywalk systems as contemporary counterparts of traditional public space. Hajer and Reindorp (2001) comment that the quality of a place and its potential role as part of a public realm are not determined by aspects such as privatisation and commercialisation. Worpole and Knox (2007) argue that if a broader notion of public space is accepted, then opportunities for association and exchange are observed to have increased and arenas for such exchange maybe in the form of schoolgates, malls, cafes, car boot sales etc. By supporting a wider definition of public space, these critiques allow greater sensitivity to the emerging public realm, allowing means of building on their inherent potential.

While there exists extensive literature on place-branding in diverse fields of marketing, urban policy, urban management and architecture, urban studies which examine the nature of public realm created through such strategies and consequent emergence of new public space typologies remains a fairly unexplored area.

This research examines the nature of contemporary public space created through the overt influence of place-branding with a particular focus on identifying emerging typologies as well as existing public space typologies which are undergoing change in the highly marketed context. It is felt that the research findings will help evaluate opportunities for successful public realm design through place-branding.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SITE OF STUDY

3.1 Research Methodology

Most discussions of public realms are centred around two aspects – that of public space, referring to the physicality of the space itself and public life, referring to the social interaction supported by the place. Since the central focus of the research is the typological analysis of public spaces in the context of place-branding, there has been an attempt to understand the physical implications of branding strategies. While another study in the social use of public spaces is simultaneously underway, this aspect has been excluded from this paper.

The research methodology comprises 2 levels, aiming to first understand the context as a whole together with the various layers that make up the built environment and then conducting a more detailed analysis of each unit of study. A mixed-method qualitative approach consisting of site analysis, direct observation accompanied by record of field notes and photography was adopted to guide and structure the research. Based on initial walk-throughs and drive-bys as well as using satellite imagery, the overall urban structure of the study area, as well as its relation to the larger city context were presented.

The classification of public spaces uses simple, easy to perceive physical attributes – forecourts, internal connectors, water edges etc. 5 public spaces were selected for typological analysis and selection was based on their representative value and existing and potential significance in contributing to the public realm. A framework for typological analysis of the public spaces was created to analyse the physical characteristics of the place and how it related to the greater public realm. This was done under 2 heads respectively – Place characteristics (Space configuration, Program and Design of public space) and Network characteristics (Edge conditions, Access and Relation to larger network of public spaces). In the final section of the paper, conclusions from the typological analysis have been reported along with recommendations to optimize their potential.

3.2 Area of Study

Like other cities in the Middle East, Abu Dhabi has been working towards establishing and securing a post-oil economy. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of a unique city image, strongly themed around concepts of culture, leisure and sustainability. Place Branding has been a pivotal strategy in this endeavour and is exemplified through projects such as the Cultural District at Sadiyat and the Leisure and Entertainment District at Yas.

The selected area of study is the southern zone of the Yas island, a 2,500 ha development project which was initiated in 2006, by Abu Dhabi based Aldar properties with the aim of creating the region's prime leisure and entertainment destination. The project proposals have since been sufficiently developed to support physical evidence which can be recorded and discussed using visual research methods.

The island is located at a distance of about 15km from the international airport and is connected to the city through the major transportation arterials – E10 (Al Raha Beach Highway) and E11 (Sheikh Zayed Road which connect Abu Dhabi to Dubai and E12 (Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Highway) which connects the island to the city via Sadiyat island (Fig 1). The E12 creates a strong edge within the island bisecting it into 2 zones. A park known as the gateway park, extending below the E12, attempts to create a partial seam along with minor roads facilitating access between the 2 zones (Fig 2).

As illustrated in Fig. 1 and 2, the island enjoys good global connectivity. However, connections with the city itself and surrounding areas are limited. Further, the exclusivity in the island location, makes it essential to rely on vehicular access.

The 3 major anchor attractions at Yas – the Yas Mall, the Ferrari World theme park and the Formula One motor sport track are all strung along a road, known as the Leisure Drive. The development is further supported by marinas (one existing and one proposed), a beach, golf course, equestrian sport track, high end hotels and a water theme park called Yas Waterworld.

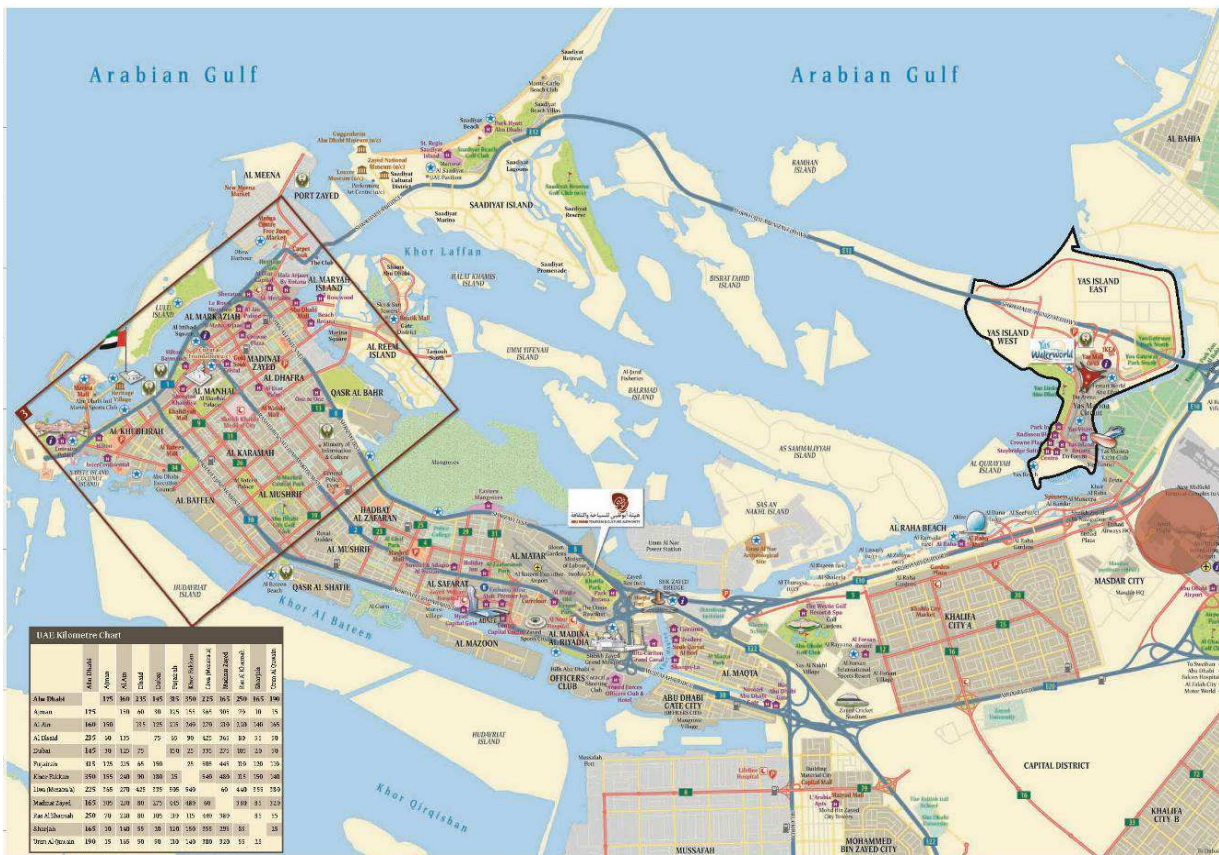


Fig. 1: Yas island (highlighted with dark boundaries): Linkages and Connectivity. Source: Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority

The island first shot to international attention in January 2006 at the Formula one Grand Prix festival wherein it was announced that Abu Dhabi had won the rights to host the Grand Prix races from 2009 – 2016, thus establishing itself as an important landmark with reference of the much-loved sport. The opening Grand Prix event was considered an important trigger to launch and brand the Yas development and event-staging continues to be used as a branding strategy. This is supported by the provision of several event venues and associated characteristics.

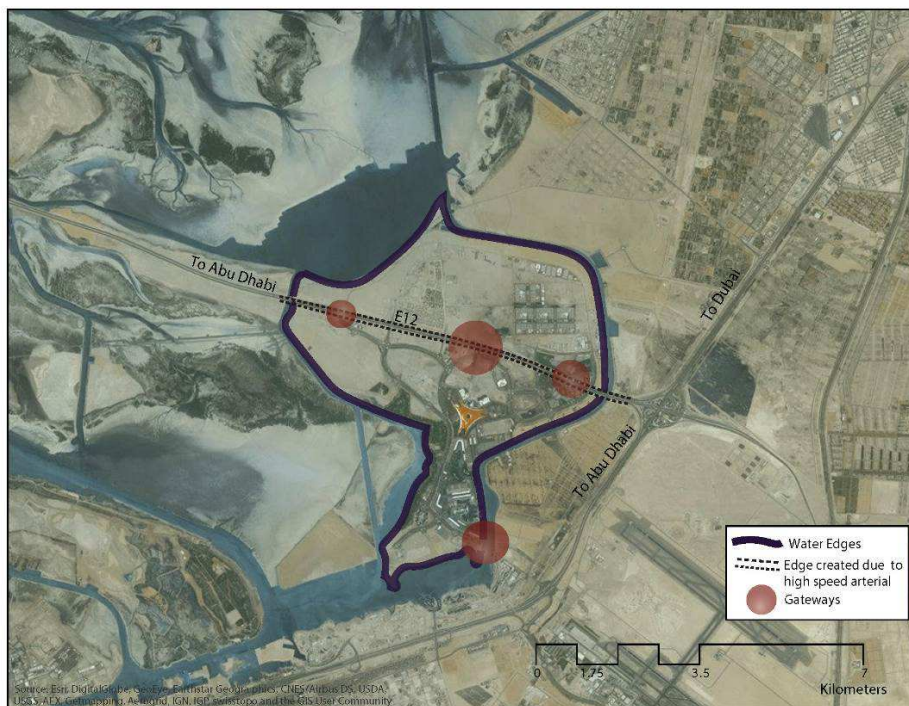


Fig. 2: Entrances and Edge Conditions

The strong association of the F1 races has helped them the development and the architectural iconography as seen in Ferrari World and the Yas Viceroy hotel. Landscaping and urban design detailing evident in street furniture etc. are of a high quality and are also a part of the branding process (Fig. 3). However, the temporal nature of events implies that the activity patterns show wide fluctuations and in non-event times, several of the places seem desolate. The large setbacks between the attractions and the street also result in poor image structure along the streets.



Fig. 3: Yas Island –Branding through street furniture, landscaping and architectural iconography.

3.3 Units of Study

Units of study for detailed analysis were identified after a general review of existing public spaces. The Leisure Drive, the primary circulation corridor, though essentially intended for the vehicle, has been provided with generous pedestrian areas on either side and is also used as a ceremonial route for occasions. Leisure spaces along the waterfront include the Yas Marina and the beach. However, the beach lacks free access and has therefore not been considered as a unit of study. Many of the attractions and tourist destinations have a public component such as an entrance lobby or forecourt which often sees a lot of public activity. Similarly entrance areas of event venues may also be considered as another public space type, witnessing concentrated periods of very high activity.

The Gateway Park is an example of the more traditional public space typology. However it has not been considered as a site of study since much of the adjoining development on the northern side is yet to be completed and is expected to have a strong influence on the use of the park. Yas Mall and adjoining spaces are also excluded since the mall had not opened when the research was being conducted.

The units of study (Fig. 4) were identified based on their representative value, ease of access for research and appropriateness of size and scale. Only spaces which had free, non-ticketed entry were considered. Another criteria was also the requirement that adjoining areas which could influence the use of these places, were sufficiently developed.

3.3.1 Yas Marina (P1)

Essentially a marina for yachts overlooking the race circuit, the Yas Marina has a promenade, several restaurants and a recently opened children's play area. The interactive water fountain is a highlight of the place and temporary markets and other events are often held here.

3.3.2 Ferrari World Entrance (P2)

Entrance, vehicular drop-off and waiting area for Ferrari World, a Ferrari-themed amusement park which opened in 2010. With 86,000 sq.m. enclosed area, the Ferrari World structure claims to be the largest indoor amusement park and its popularity as a tourist destination ensures that there is heavy footfall in the selected public space.

3.3.3 Entrance Hall to Ferrari World and Yas Marina (P3)

The pneumatic roof covered structure encloses an indoor public space which functions as an entrance lobby for Ferrari World and also provides direct connectivity between Yas Mall and Ferrari World.

3.3.4 Du arena entrance (P4)

The plaza and entrance area is associated with the du Arena, an outdoor entertainment venue which regularly hosts high-profile musical concerts. The space witnesses wide ranges in temporal activity with the presence of large crowds on event days.

3.3.5 Leisure Drive (P5)

Though the Leisure Drive is itself intended for vehicular circulation, it is flanked by wide strips of pedestrian areas with great attention paid to landscaping, street furniture and detailing. One such stretch adjoining the du Arena entrance has been considered for the study, in order to investigate the changing role of the linear public space.

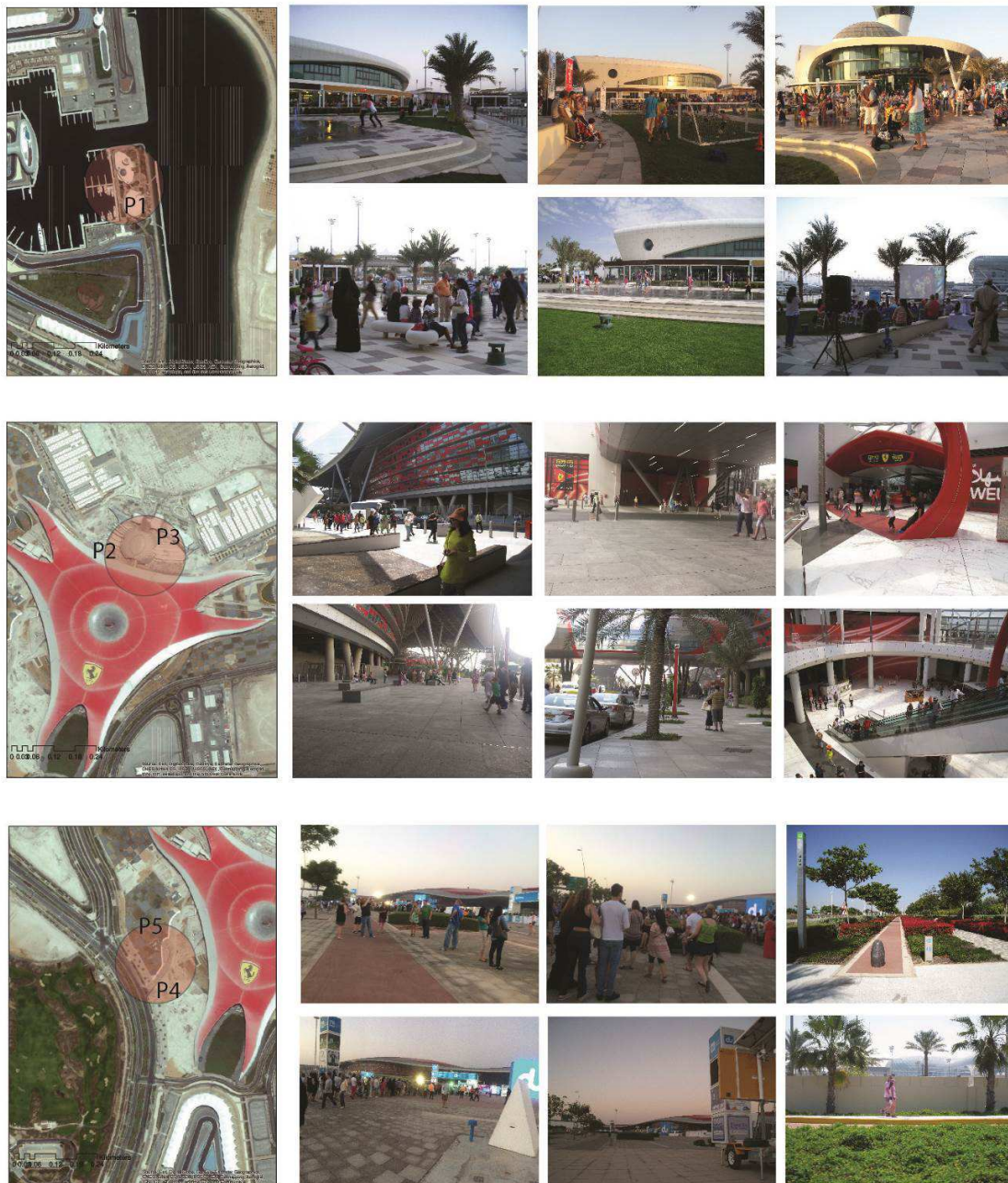


Fig. 4: Selected units of study – Yas Marina (P1), Ferrari World Entrance (P2), Internal Hall connecting Yas Mall and Ferrari World (P3), Du Arena entrance (P4), Leisure Drive (P5).

3.4 Typological Analysis of selected Public Places

A framework for typological analysis of the public spaces (Table 1) was created to analyse the physical characteristics of the places, how it related to the greater public realm and could foster public life. This was done under 2 heads respectively – Place characteristics (Space configuration, Program, Design of public space) and Network characteristics (Edge Conditions, Access, Connection / relation to larger network of public spaces).

Yas Marina (P1)	Place Characteristics	Space Configuration	Program	Design of Public Space
		Promenade and small-scaled plazas and open spaces.	Landscaping with play areas for children. Events such as weekly market fairs, themed evenings and outdoor film screenings are frequently organized.	High quality landscaping with the interactive water fountain serving as a very popular feature. Promenade widths are fairly restricted and visitor amenities like toilets etc. are insufficient.
	Network Characteristics	Edge conditions	Access	Relation to larger public space network
		Active and permeable edge with restaurants. Edges of spaces blend with ground floor uses of buildings. All restaurants have outdoor seating areas and some have walls with very large windows, which are kept open in cooler weather.	Accessed through private vehicles and tourist buses only. Vehicular access is off a fairly large distance from the main circulation.	Limited access by public transport results in this being a stand-alone place. A security checkpoint (though it does not stop vehicles) may create ambiguity regarding the public status of the space.

Ferrari World Entrance (P2)	Place Characteristics	Space Configuration	Program	Design of Public Space
		Shaded open space and pedestrian areas between the Ferrari world and the entrance hall create a sense of enclosure.	No formal program. Essentially a drop-off and waiting area for a destination. Also a common meeting place between groups of people who are visiting the attractions.	Space configuration between buildings allows it to be shaded at most times. Paving of areas allows pedestrian priority. Sufficient seating is provided.
	Network Characteristics	Edge conditions	Access	Relation to larger public space network
		Edged by Entrance Hall and Ferrari World parking. Limited interaction with ground floor uses, particularly since the ground floor of the Ferrari World only has parking and the building front is not active.	By personal vehicles and public transport. A bus stop for the Yas shuttle is also located within the space. Location at a considerable distance from the main island circulation is a deterrent to pedestrian access.	Important nodal location due to adjacency with Yas Mall and Ferrari World.

Internal Hall connecting Yas Mall and Ferrari World (P3)	Place Characteristics	Space Configuration	Program	Design of Public Space
		Enclosed public space over 2 floors having a circular plan with access to Yas Mall and Ferrari World being diametrically opposite to each other. Translucent roof ensures the area is flooded with natural light.	Visitor amenities, souvenir shops, small food outlets, ticketing area to Ferrari attractions.	Focus on facilitating circulation between entrance level and upper floor from which both the Yas Mall and Ferrari World are accessed. Food court type seating is available on the ground floor. Greater focus appears to be laid on external architecture of space.
	Network Characteristics	Edge conditions	Access	Relation to larger public space network
		Internal public space – hence defined through external shell of building	Located at vehicular drop-off for Ferrari World. Bus stop for island shuttle is located across the road. Location at a considerable distance from the main island circulation is a deterrent to pedestrian access.	Serves as an internal pedestrian connection between 2 major activity nodes – the Yas Mall and Ferrari world allowing visitors to continue from one attraction to the other.
Du Arena entrance (P4)	Place Characteristics	Space Configuration	Program	Design of Public Space
		Crescent-shaped, entrance forecourt to major event venue.	Used as Queuing area for ticketing. Heavy presence of media, event organizers and security during event times. Event-related promotional activities are sometimes planned here. Very limited activity is observed on non-event days.	Mainly paved area with pockets of green. Seating provided is very inadequate and unimaginative. Temporary installations and signage, themed as per the event are sometimes set up.
	Network Characteristics	Edge conditions	Access	Relation to larger public space network
		Edged by Leisure Drive on one side and the du arena (major events venue) property line on the other.	Accessed by vehicle from Leisure Drive and by public transport – bus stops. Tourists living in the hotels choose to sometimes walk to the location.	Limited connectivity with larger public realm probably since users of this space have a very narrow interest in the event.
Leisure Drive – Stretch adjoining du Arena (P5)	Place Characteristics	Space Configuration	Program	Design of Public Space
		Major circulation route - a 6-lane road with extensive pedestrian strips, cycling tracks and landscaped plantation along its length.	Predominantly a circulation route for the vehicle. Serves as a ceremonial route in select events. Also used by cycling / jogging enthusiasts. Limited pedestrian traffic except in case of events.	High quality landscape design – sidewalks, street furniture, plantation, signage and lighting have been provided.
	Network Characteristics	Edge conditions	Access	Relation to larger public space network
		Absence of continuous and active street wall. Buildings have very large setbacks from property lines and therefore do not create a built edge.	Good connectivity at a global scale. However, edge conditions of island limit the access from surrounding communities.	Limited integration and transitioning with public components of developments, which adjoin the Leisure Drive.

Table 1: Framework for typological analysis of selected public spaces

4 DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

This study discusses the physical manifestations of place-branding which is essentially a non-physical phenomenon, by analysing resultant public space typologies and examining their characteristics.

A common pattern which emerged, when analysing the various units of study was that place characteristics appear to have been given far more attention in comparison to network characteristics with most spaces having poorly defined edges and little or no connectivity with the larger public realm. This may also be interpreted as an indicator of the overall need for better definition of the larger public space network itself. The deficiency in network characteristics also brings to light somewhat conflicting goals between place-branding, where exclusiveness helps create a clear brand image, and public realm creation, which generally aims to be inclusive. While location and edges of the Yas Island may help create an exclusive brand image, controlled access and easier place-management, they do not facilitate its integration with the greater urban fabric of the city.

As previously mentioned, edge conditions in most areas were a feature that needed improvement since the buildings are separated from the public space with no intermediate transition spaces. A notable exception was the Yas Marina where the restaurant buildings with their porous edges and transition areas in the form of outdoor seating helped create an active edge along all building fronts, even though a continuous enclosure was absent for the precinct.

The Ferrari World drop-off area and the internal hall connecting it to Yas Mall present an interesting case in emerging public space typologies. The drop-off area is directly plugged onto a circulation route with favourable public transport access and aims to connect with the adjoining activity node of the tourist circuit, the Yas Mall through an internal hall. These are favourable features which can respond positively towards greater vibrancy in the public realm. There is also an attempt to design the drop-off area for public use by allowing pedestrian priority in crossings, provision of seating, lighting effects and water features. While the entrance hall may easily be dismissed as a mall extension, it too offers an alternative by serving as a connector typology and may be found to be an appropriate response, suiting both the context of place-branding as well as the climate, which often calls for enclosed or covered public places. This may be appreciated further when compared with other destination entrance forecourts such as the Yas Waterworld (not in study) which does not address issues of public transport access and allocates very limited area in front of the ticketing check. Hence appropriate treatment and expansion of this public-private interface can be a strategic measure in activating a greater public response.

On the other hand, the du Arena forecourt enjoys direct access off the Leisure Drive, but does not adequately consider public space design, leaving the space as a large neutral space used only for queuing for events and for streamlining large crowds. While it may be argued whether such spaces for occasional queuing can rightly be considered a public space, however, they remain arenas where exchange and interaction takes place and measures to enhance their place characteristics and improve their adaptability could help such spaces become more meaningful components of the public realm.

Despite the high quality detailing, the landscaped sections along the Leisure Drive are vastly underutilized. This illustrates the problem presented by event-centred developments, which are common in branded contexts, wherein sizing and treatment needs to tackle both peak as well as non-event use.

In addition to the greater importance assigned to place characteristics, it was found that special emphasis was given to programming of spaces, primarily through events in order to encourage their use. This may be seen as a possible counter measure to overcome the deficient network characteristics of the public spaces. Announcements for various events of varying scales are made with regularity and in turn create a public realm which shows high temporal variations in activity.

5 CONCLUSION

As explained in the section on research methodology, this paper focusses on the physical public space and excludes the other facet of the public realm, namely its social use. Another research is simultaneously underway which studies the use of these spaces and collects feedback from users. It is expected that findings from that study will provide further insights into the contemporary public realm created in the context of place-branding. It must also be mentioned that public realms require sufficient time to grow and evolve.

Hence, follow-up studies which track developments in public transport and growth of adjoining areas would also yield interesting results regarding the changes in the public realm.

The findings from this research help highlight potential areas where improvements in typological characteristics could contribute towards a more vibrant and sustainable public realm, while leveraging on the place-branding efforts. As an example, public components of individual project programs could be identified and articulated so as to create a cohesive and integrated public space network. Increased awareness among architecture and urban design professionals regarding the potential of new public space typologies, such as entrance forecourts to tourist attractions and event venues, would result in greater sensitivity and potentially a positive contribution.

The heavy reliance on program, as opposed to public space typology implies that there is a constant demand on management and programming of public spaces, for the space to be adequately used. The development of emerging public space typologies can help offset this demand by offering a useful tool which helps institute the public realm as an integral layer of the urban infrastructure.

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