

The Khatt Foundation, Center for Arabic Typography

Van Tuyl Van Serooskerkenweg 142, 1076 JT Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Tel. +31 20 6766269, www.khnt.net

Project Description: Typography in the City V2.0

For the first time in history the earth's population is more urban than rural. This means that for most people on this planet, the city has become their natural habitat. When in this context we speak of growth and blossom, terrain and flow, or use other natural metaphors, we speak in fact of engineering, architecture and design. We talk about the city as a landscape that we have created ourselves and continue to shape. Shaping a place is as much about imagining it as it is about building. —Text from 'Design for the Urban Landscape'. Experimentadesign. Space and Place. Amsterdam 2008.

The previous version of the project (v1.0) focused on creating Arabic companions for existing Latin fonts (by the Dutch designers on the project), and especially for textfaces and book design. The *Typographic Matchmaking in the City V2.0* project will focus on typography's use in placemaking within an urban context, at human scale and to oversized graphics. Typography will be inspired, on the visual and conceptual level, from specific sites and locations in the city where bilingual textual communication can be employed to bring the place closer to the culture and the human experience of the city. The design teams (5 teams each consisting of 2 graphic/type designers and one architect) will explore the idea of type in the built environment, where we would encourage intercultural dialogue through getting inspirations from both Dutch and Arab/Middle Eastern visual street culture.

The work could be more expressive, illustrative and experimental than what is allowed for by traditional textfaces. The intent is to be playful, create expressive type designs and applications (exploring different material or virtual applications) and translating cultural ideas into concrete design products (in the form of digital fonts and actual prototypes that could be exhibited outdoors or indoors at the specific sites). The fonts developed will be made from scratch (both the Latin and Arabic) designed at the same time and inspired by each other's script traditions, and will be applied as poetic narratives in the form of participatory public art (stories, poetry, and other textual information) into the public spaces of two parallel cities: Dubai and Amsterdam.

The idea of working on type in the built environment has come as a reaction to the excessive and megalomaniac architectural developments that are taking place all over the Arab world (from Morocco, to Egypt, to Syria, to especially the Gulf States...) where there is a need for creating sustainable cities through cultural production and more experience oriented urban design. Towards this end we can make design proposals (while these building projects are still at their blueprint stage). This could eventually be a good source of inspiration and an ideal outlet for exhibiting and marketing the project's end products (as well as these new developing cities). In addition marrying typography to architectural space is (in a contemporary form) is a way of continuing one of the aspects of Islamic architecture (also lettering and building are not uncommon in European buildings at the turn of the 20th century), so linking our project back to some historical form is another way of creating sustainable cultural production which are much needed in our cities today which are slowly becoming nothing more than a carnival of architectural landmarks, to be seen all over the world, losing the local culture and soul of each city and therefore its uniqueness.

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More than half of the world's population currently lives in cities, and so these urban agglomerations are defining the nature of our future global civilizations and we should take care to make them conducive to a wealth of life experiences. Dubai for instance has practically totally lost the street life that it used to enjoy in the older parts of the city. Bringing back street life that is not only dependent on shopping is important for creating livable urban environments. The livable city should be multilayered mixing the different usage of its spaces so that it engages its inhabitants intimately and on multiple levels especially on the public level. A city should have the diversity in cultural as well as functional activities and should be experienced at human level on the streets where all its inhabitants can interact.

The designs we will be proposing should engage the inhabitants and visitors of the respective neighborhoods at an individual as well as community level at the physical or virtual level. The designs may incorporate 3D objects, temporary structures, and temporal and changing motion graphics, or interactive designs that can be accessed by mobile phones or live video/internet feed... technology and physical reality will merge and add to the experience of the specific sites. These media that most people use to connect to others in their daily working/living spaces could be used in the public realm so that there is a more seamless integration of all aspects of the lives of the city's inhabitants and visitors. We hope to achieve a more playful and engaging interaction between the inhabitants or visitors of the city and the physical public space through creating public art that invites to physically interact thus creating a different type of active experience (rather than the passive consumerist experience) where the audience may become partners in the creation of the artwork and where the public space becomes a more communal and creative meeting ground. We would like to create a 'place' where people of all cultures can learn about and enjoy the culture in which they are living.

Parallels and differences between Amsterdam and Dubai

There are several similarities between Amsterdam and Dubai that make them ideal starting points for this project that aims to create (above all) a cultural dialogues between these twin cities:

1. Both Dubai and Amsterdam are fully fabricated cities; Dubai is constructed out of the barren desert and Amsterdam out of the muddy waters
2. Both cities are built around a commercial harbor by merchants and are wealthy hubs of trade and economic activities
3. Both cities have waterways (Amsterdam's canals, and Dubai's creek) originally conceived as means for transportation of goods and now as the city's local characteristic and tourist attraction
4. Both cities are ever renewing and expanding their urban territories (Amsterdam reclaiming new land from the sea and old neighborhoods and transforming them into new urban centers, and Dubai extending the creek and linking it back to the sea in a semi-circular structure very much like the canals of old Amsterdam and building new urban centers along this reclaimed land from the desert)
5. Both cities are cosmopolitan and multicultural hubs with a diverse international population that come from all over the world to experience the city or to settle
6. Both cities are progressive (each in their own way) and are design conscious and keen on constructing metropolitan lifestyles for the 21st century

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The differences between Amsterdam and Dubai can form interesting and enriching material that can be highlighted in the design proposals:

1. The geographic location can be a nice diametrical opposite with Amsterdam in the North-West, and Dubai in the South-East
2. The language and written script can be an interesting difference Latin vs. Arabic and how to make the two work together seamlessly and get applied as bilingual text-image in both cities, how would that be read and experienced in the different cultural contexts
3. The different histories of these cities and how to find parallels between the two and tell their stories in two different languages and contexts
4. The scale difference is considerable between Amsterdam and Dubai, structures are larger and spaces are wider in Dubai than in Amsterdam
5. Amsterdam is a more pedestrian city whereas Dubai is more of a car-oriented city with wider streets and a complex network of highways that dissect the city and form a central axis (as opposed to the peripheral structure of highways around Amsterdam).

The differences and similarities may be more and will certainly be further explored and discovered as we undertake the research and analysis of the sites and the cities that we will be working on. As a starting point we as sites to be worked on that have similar historical as well as contemporary urban plans the *Khor Dubai project or creekfront* (in Dubai) and the *Ij riverfront* urban developments (in Amsterdam).

The gigantic cultural development project, Khor Dubai will span from the oldest settlement at the mouth of the Creek, to form a top-notch cultural zone is to be built beginning here and running for about 20 kilometers along the Creek and an artificial extension of the waterway as far as the completely new district, Business Bay. Currently planned are 1 opera house, more than 10 museums, 14 theaters, 11 galleries, 9 public libraries, 72 "cultural icons", and 7 cultural and arts institutes for local and foreign artists. Khor Dubai is to be an integrating, national project, "a living museum" developing in partnership between the public and private sectors and "celebrating the multi-cultural diversity of Dubai", fusing the native heritage of the Emiratis with the highly diverse other cultures who live in the city.