

MIDDLE EAST STUDIES IN ACTION: ANNUAL UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH POSTER SESSION

Bridging the Gap between Expectation and Reality: Urban Planning and the Public Bus System in Abu Dhabi

Seunga Iris Ryu
New York University, Abu Dhabi

In urban planning, governments usually hold the decision-making power to shape not only city landscapes but also people's lives with the promoted goals of social welfare. Although states expect their own version of ideal scenarios in mind when carrying out infrastructural developments, after competition, people in reality have their own ways of perceiving and utilizing state-made infrastructures and urban transportation, sometimes in alignment with government plan, and sometimes at odds with it. Abu Dhabi is one of the cities in the world in which the government planned out the whole city and created urban infrastructure from scratch, including the city bus system. Although the Abu Dhabi public buses started operating in 2008, car dependency is still high and many residents consider public buses to be inefficient and time consuming and only used by certain immigrant working population.

Through quantitative and qualitative methods, this poster analyzes the Department of Transport (DoT)'s initial goals of establishing the public bus system, the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the currently implemented bus system, and real users' experiences and social meanings of public transport in Abu Dhabi. The paper will argue that while the DoT constructed the urban transportation system to facilitate economic activities and comply to the idealized version of modernity, the public buses reinforce social stratification and their inefficiency and low cost-effectiveness push people to find strategic ways to navigate the city that challenge or even subvert the intentions of the DoT. By looking at a specific case of Abu Dhabi's public bus system, this paper strives to provide a better interface of government-led urban design and the actual practice of the residents in terms of urban planning and transport infrastructure, commonly practiced and constructed on a global level. ✂

Bridging the Gap between Expectation and Reality: Urban Planning and the Public Bus System in Abu Dhabi

جامعة نيويورك أبوظبي
NYU | ABU DHABI

Seunga Iris Ryu

Motivating Questions

- What are the stated and underlying goals of establishing Abu Dhabi public bus system?
- For whom was this new public transportation system made?
- How has the UAE government utilized public transport system in the process of national branding?
- How do Abu Dhabi city residents evaluate and perceive the current public bus system?

Methodology

- Textual analysis and compilation of the following:
- Official documents published by the Abu Dhabi government about visions and plans for urban planning, mobility, economic and sustainable development
 - Newspaper articles about Abu Dhabi bus system or DoT
 - Secondary sources (books, Journals, reports, etc.) on topics of urban planning, infrastructural development, and mobility in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Los Angeles, Seoul, and so on



Background

Infrastructural Development

- Infrastructural development is commonly tied with the notion of national development
- Infrastructural development is considered to be a crucial element of an idealized version of modernity
- Through infrastructural developments, states can often easily control and shape people's lives and reinforce social cleavages

Mobility and Public Transport

- Public transport can be considered a form of welfare that reduces social and economic disparities
- Mobility patterns and systems are becoming standardized globally
- Urban mobility dynamic manifests social class division and sometimes even deepens social stratification due to social stigma attached to public transport

Abu Dhabi & Dubai, UAE

- UAE is highly socio-stratified with expatriate workers of low income being the majority of the population
- Cars are not feasible transportation options for underprivileged class
- Dubai's fast and massive urban development was the ruler-family's attempt to secure hegemony and diversify the economy

Findings

Promoted & Latent Goals

Evaluation & Perception

DoT & UPC's Promoted Goals

- Decrease high car dependency
- Population growth
- Traffic congestion
- Environmental sustainability

DoT & UPC's Possible Latent Goals

- Welfare by increasing accessibility for all social classes
- Economic diversification
- Attract global talents mostly for business industry
- Promote tourism and provide convenience for tourists
- Present Abu Dhabi city to the global stage by fitting the common criteria of a great city

Residents' Evaluation

- Positively saw cheap fares, high quality facilities, and 24-hour services
- Complaint about long hours of wait, crowdedness during peak hours
- Still low demand and unpopular mode of transport

Residents' Perception

- Bus stigma present, as public buses are associated with so called "unskilled" migrant workers
- New road toll system, which aims to make people use public buses for economic reasons, may exacerbate the already-present stigma

Conclusion

While the DoT established the public bus system to promote economic diversification and create an idealized form of a modern city, the public buses reinforce social stratification as they are mainly used by low-paid migrant workers and has a stigma attached to its utilization. Moreover, the government's implementation of the transport system seems inefficient. State-led urban planning and goals often differ from the actual implementation and utilization by residents, a gap commonly found in processes and outcomes of urban planning and transport infrastructure.