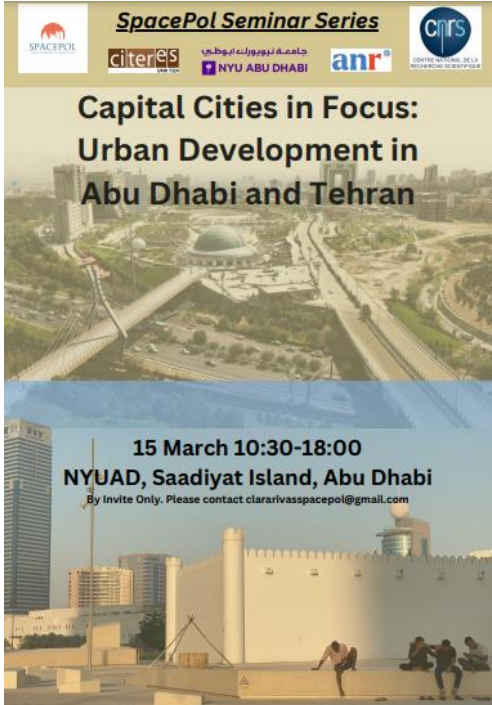


SPACEPOL Seminar Series

NYUADI, Abu Dhabi 15 March 2024

Capital Cities in Focus: Urban Development in Abu Dhabi and Tehran



This SpacePol seminar continued the comparative exploration initiated by the previous SpacePol workshop on Astana, Moscow, and Ankara, held in Istanbul in October 2023. Speakers delved into the various and at times contradictory aspects of urban realities in the capital cities of Abu Dhabi and Tehran, particularly focusing on:

1. **Perceptions:** Examining the symbolic functions of the capitals, theoretical approaches, historical significance, and their role in identity dynamics. Tangible symbolic objects such as iconic buildings, monuments, and mega-projects. Speakers analysed the creation and evolution of the capitals' image at different scales, emphasizing the historical perception of these elements.

2. **Actors:** We explored the role of various actors in shaping urban policies, thereby influencing the

production and transformation of urban spaces in these capital cities. Understanding how private and public actors and stakeholders interact with each other sheds light on the dynamic processes involved in shaping the urban environment.

3. **Controversies:** Addressing social reactions to urban policies, local governance, and the resolution of public issues. Analysis of frictions between different groups and competing discourses at the municipal level, along with case studies of mobilization for or against certain projects. Emphasis on the spatial dimensions of social processes.



Mina Saïdi (LAVUE, Paris): The role of public spaces in the processes of urban transformation projects in Tehran



The presentation delves into the production strategy behind new public spaces developed by the state, examining the complex dynamics among actors, uses, and representations. Using the "Bamland" project in Chitgar as a case study, it explores the transformation of a cultural and leisure initiative into a luxury real estate venture. This transition reflects a shift from a state policy aimed at providing housing for the poorest to a

commercial operation facilitated by the creation of public spaces. The emergence of Bam Land Shopping & Recreational Complex, with its vast commercial area and parking spaces, signifies the evolution of the project from its initial intention to provide leisure and cultural activities to becoming a symbol of commercialization, showcasing the unintended consequences of luxury development on personal freedoms, such as women's attire. The question then becomes: are these so-called openings (the presence of unveiled women) really unintended? Does the state allow this in order to appease certain populations and/or facilitate new spaces of consumption?

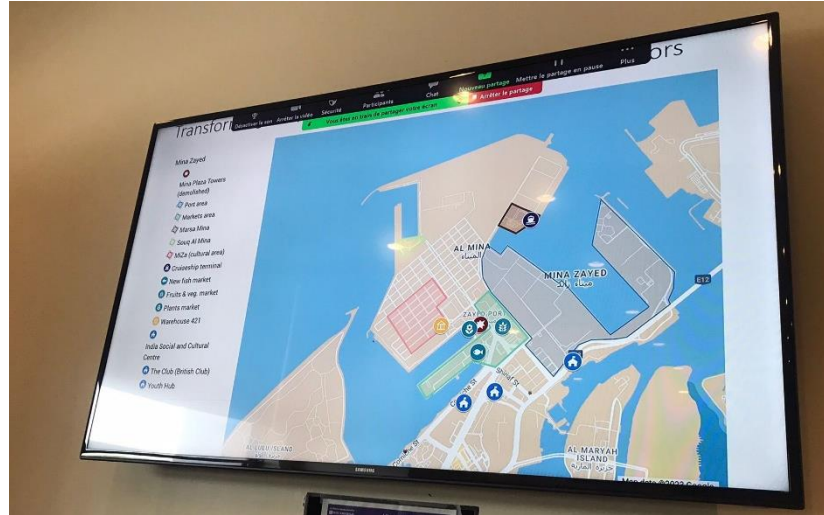
Through the lens of Bamland's transformation, the presentation raised questions about the underlying motivations and consequences of state-led urban projects, highlighting the tension between public interest and commercialization. The evolution of Bamland from a nature and leisure reserve to a luxury commercial space underscores broader shifts in urban development strategies and the commodification of public amenities. This case study prompts reflection on the multifaceted nature of urban planning decisions, their social implications, and the need for critical analysis of the processes shaping contemporary urban landscapes.

Laure Assaf (NYUAD, Abu Dhabi): Urban 'renewal' and the memory of the city. Mina Zayed and the new trends of urban development in Abu Dhabi

In November 2020, media headlines in the United Arab Emirates were unusually devoted to a demolition, rather than an architectural achievement: that of Abu Dhabi's Mina Plaza, a four-towers complex which had stood abandoned for over a decade. While their construction had stalled during the financial crisis of the late 2000s, the towers' demolition, just as the country was moving away from the COVID-19 pandemic, was highly symbolic. It launched a new stage in the port's "redevelopment": one that would see the transplantation of existing marketplaces into new structures and concretize the turning of the old industrial port into a "retail hub". Using the case-study of Mina Zayed as an entry point to explore the new orientations of the capital's urban development, this communication explores how the vocabulary of urban renewal (regeneration, revitalization, redevelopment) underpins a tension: while post-oil economic plans imply

the development of Abu Dhabi as a global trade and tourism destination, its status as capital requires a display of the continuity of power and of the legacy of the country's founder. The analysis of how these concomitant imperatives is embodied in the port's projected development will then be contrasted to alternative, and conflicted, perceptions of this urban space by Abu Dhabi residents.

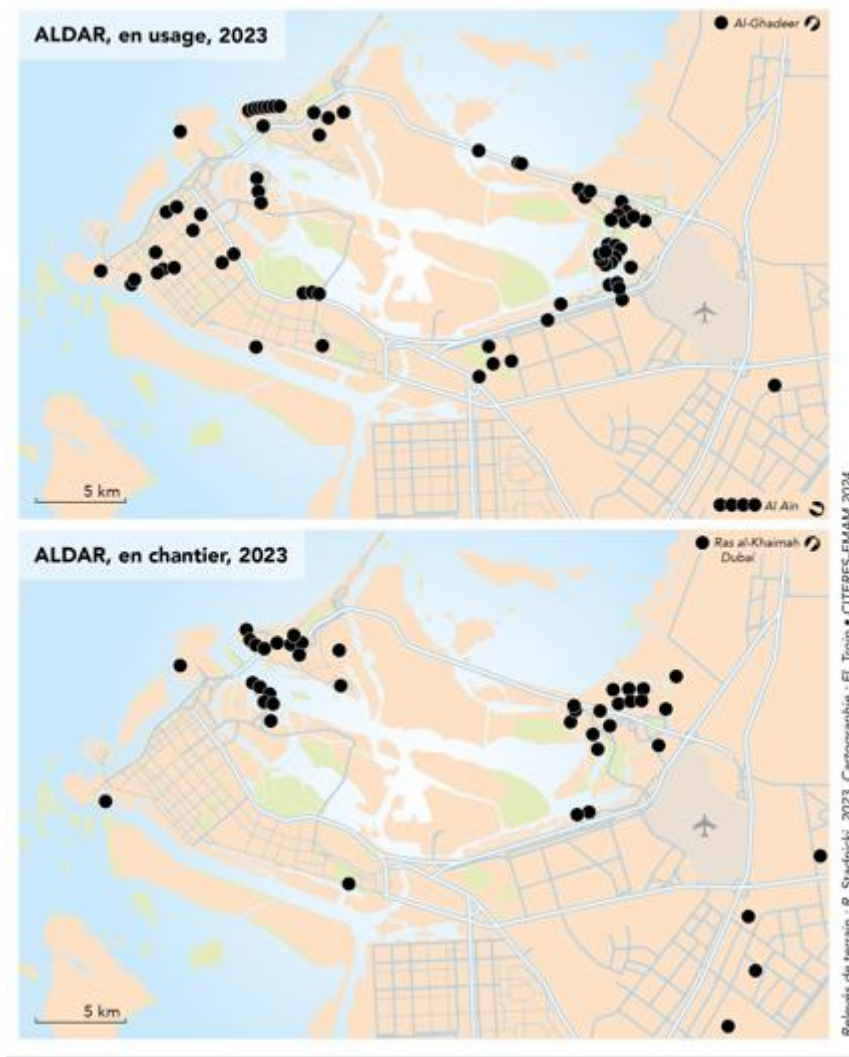
Dr Assaf identified the new urban vocabulary vis a vis the traditional urban narratives being mobilized around Mina Zayed port. She also highlighted the role of para-statal actors (people involved in the urban regeneration project who have something to do with the state in one capacity or another). The port is



undergoing a process of gentrification, but not necessarily as we know it. If there were informal uses of the space, through the presence of truck drivers or security guards and their makeshift bathrooms and gardens, it would be easy to portray as a top-down process when in fact it is an assembling of actors with divergent objectives. Space is being developed by Aldar, a well-known Abu Dhabi real estate promoter, and through an art district, trying to use existing structures such as warehouses. There is an existing will to preserve the legacy of the port, which is absent in the rest of the city, it talks of a sentimental attachment to the port.

She also identified three different ways of reacting to the redevelopment: court cases, whereby the distribution of the industrial land done by the state is being contested and compensation is involved; through journalistic writing about the memories of the port, many on behalf of South Asian workers displaced by the transformation; through artistic works: documenting spaces and materials that are about to disappear.

Roman Stadnicki (CITERES, Université de Tours): The Developer and the City: A Geography of Rescaling in Abu Dhabi.



The exploration of the relationship between urban development and power dynamics in Abu Dhabi delves into the expansive realm of Aldar, a key player in reshaping the city's landscape. With a focus on Aldar's multifaceted presence, the inquiry into its operations reveals a complex interplay between public and private spheres. Aldar's evolution from a private real estate developer to an influential planner reflects the fusion of economic and political elites, epitomizing a form of crony capitalism or tribal capitalism prevalent in Gulf countries. This transformation is evident in Aldar's extensive portfolio, spanning iconic landmarks, infrastructure projects, and urban planning initiatives, thereby exerting significant influence on the city's identity and growth trajectory.

Aldar's omnipresence in Abu Dhabi is underscored by its strategic positioning and branding efforts, manifesting in diverse forms of display and inscription across the urban fabric. Its ventures extend beyond traditional real estate development to encompass urban planning, infrastructure, and social initiatives, mirroring the ethos of a developmental state seeking to extract urban rent through symbiotic relationships between the developer and government. This rescaling of power dynamics



contradicts earlier urban planning visions, highlighting tensions between controlled growth and frenetic development. Moreover, Aldar's expansion beyond Abu Dhabi, both domestically and internationally, contributes to the internationalization of Gulf capital, solidifying the UAE's symbolic power through strategic real estate investments and export strategies. Ultimately, the study of Aldar's role in Abu Dhabi's urban transformation offers critical insights into the complex interplay between urban development, power relations, and geopolitical dynamics, warranting further examination within the framework of Spacepol's international scope.

Amin Moghadam and Jérémie Molho (Toronto Metropolitan University): Diversity and knowledge Infrastructures in Abu Dhabi's urban development.

As the Arab Gulf Nations achieved independence in the 1960s and 1970s, the development of their capital cities emerged as pivotal tools for nation-building. Their strategic position in global flows, substantial oil and gas revenues, and a significant influx of migrants fuelled the swift expansion of these urban centers. Concurrently, the political and geopolitical shifts in the Middle East over the past four decades have bolstered the stature of these nations and their capitals both regionally and globally. The multifaceted dynamics at local, national, regional, and global levels are manifest in the urban policies of these capital cities. These policies materialized through numerous urban projects and architectural landmarks, striving to position these cities on the global stage. Against this specific historical backdrop, urban leaders in these cities have



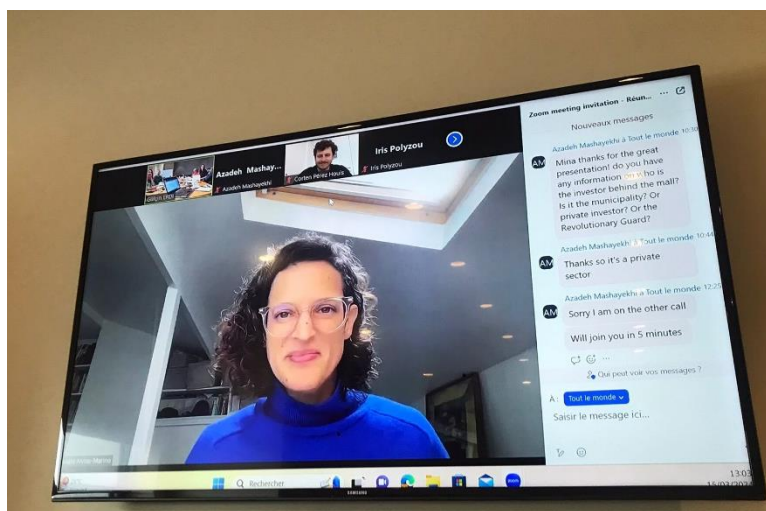
mobilized transnationally circulating narratives such as the creative city, the knowledge economy, and religious diversity as capital city-making frames.

This presentation compared two such capitals: Doha and Abu Dhabi. Sharing a regional environment, these cities also stand as competitors, each endeavouring to carve a niche in regional and global landscapes, all while addressing intrinsic challenges, including the shaping of Emirati and Qatari national identities. In this paper, it was examined how the notion of "knowledge" is mobilized within the rhetoric of urban projects in these two capitals to project their influence and power at different scales. The presentation focused on Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island and Doha's Education City, which epitomize these cities' respective ambitions to construct themselves as 'knowledge capitals'.

These urban projects, shaped by many key players in the global city-making sphere and benefitting from the attraction of multiple skilled professionals, aim to establish alternative urban models, not only through their design but also through the institutions they house. These establishments—world-class museums, research centers, branches of global universities, and heritage institutions—not only symbolize the cities' ambitions but also serve as magnets to attract knowledge professionals, thereby reinforcing their emerging stature as global centers for knowledge creation. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in both cities, stakeholder interviews, and communication strategy analyses, this presentation employs Jennifer Robinson's concept of comparative experiments to explore the strategies adopted by Abu Dhabi and Doha in their pursuit to be recognized as 'knowledge capitals'.

Anahi Alviso-Marino (LAVUE, Paris): Un-monumenting, place-making and national storytelling through monuments in Abu Dhabi.

The research on place-making, national storytelling, and un-monumenting through Abu Dhabi's monuments is framed around understanding the biographical trajectory of these monuments in public spaces. Monuments are viewed as pivotal points for observing changes in the state, intersecting with the city, state, and art. Questions arise about the processes



through which monuments are established, the social and political dynamics that define their existence, and how their transformations reflect broader societal and political changes, especially in authoritarian contexts. Methodologically, the research adopts a biographical approach, reconstructing the life cycle of monuments from inception to afterlife, and involves tracing the involvement of various actors. The focus is primarily on monumental sculptural artworks commissioned to commemorate sites, figures, and events or to enhance the cityscape, highlighting their public nature and the diverse actors involved in their creation.

Preliminary fieldwork in Abu Dhabi underscores the complexity of monument dynamics, revealing challenges in accessing information and negotiating clearance issues. Following a brief fieldwork endeavor, the full biography of the monuments explored remains elusive. However, the focus narrows to two significant monuments: the monumental portrait of Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan al Nahyan and The Constellation, situated at the intersection of Emirates Palace, the Corniche, and ADNOC's headquarters. The portrait, created by Pakistani artist Liaquat Ali Khan in the late 1990s, stood at 35 meters tall and consisted of 284 painted plywood panels with a neon-lit plastic mosaic frame. Despite its deterioration, it remained a potent symbol until the unveiling of the Founder's Memorial in 2018, coinciding with the centenary of Sheikh Zayed's birth. This newer project, initiated without open competition, saw American artist Ralph Helmick commissioned to design The Constellation, a dynamic three-dimensional portrait comprised of celestial shapes, symbolizing Sheikh Zayed's enduring vision and values. The monument remains an "ad hoc" project for the Salama Bint Hamdan Foundation, underscoring the interconnected processes of monumenting and un-monumenting that reflect larger dynamics in the city and country.

Azadeh Mashayekhi (UCL, London): Politics of planning urban mega-projects in Tehran.

Focusing on the link between power and urban space in the formation of capital cities, Dr Mashayekhi's paper uses Tehran, the capital city of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a case study, with its particular socio-political situation as the capital of a modern theocratic state. By reflecting on Iran's political transition after the 1979 Revolution and by reviewing four decades of state-making practices, this paper shows how the polarised political structure of Iran – which combines authoritarian and democratic practices, and where sovereignty is divided between elected executives and unelected ones – has directly influenced urban planning and development policies and practices and, therefore, Tehran's urban form. Focusing on several post-revolution mega-urban development projects in Tehran namely Abbas-Abad hill development (1981-2007) and Maskan Mehr (2007-2022) this paper shows how the planning and development of these projects are the outcomes of the political project of the state and its founding ideology. Nevertheless, the finding of this paper shows that the making of capital cities,

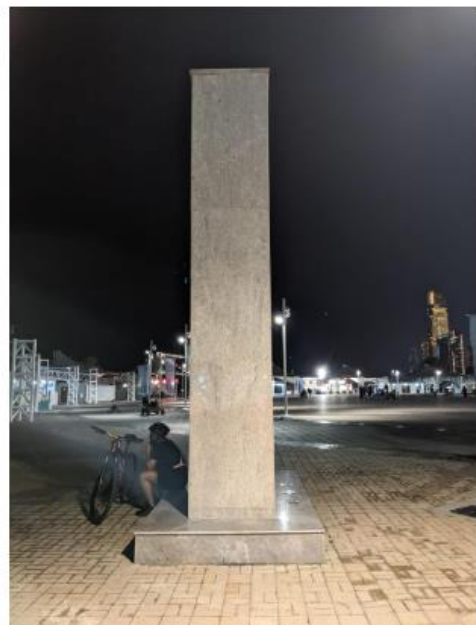
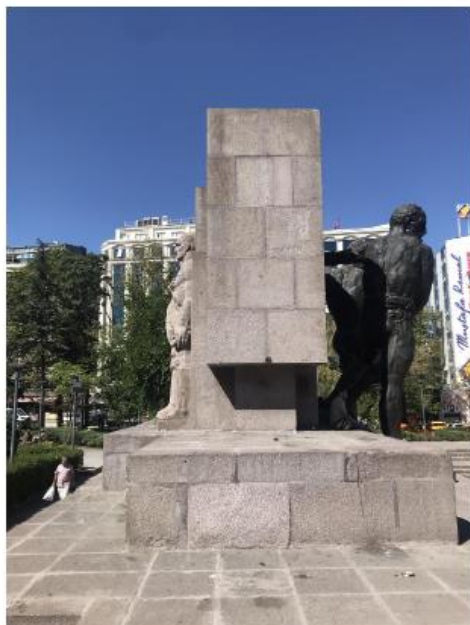


not only reflects the political project of the state but in fact, is the main device with which the state apparatus further consolidates its power and authority and maintains its legitimacy.

Dr Mashayekhi focused on the creation of political subjects through urban projects in Tehran. She identified the different stages in the urban development project of Abbas-Abad hill, and how those stages far from representing a homogeneous process they reflect the different changes in the Iranian political landscape through process fragmentations. The role of the mayor becomes important as a political actor. Importantly, the Abbas-Abad Hill transformation has a three-fold dimension: it was declared a new cultural and diplomatic center; a new bridge Tabiat bridge was built after the design of a young architect Leila Araghian (a bridge that incidentally allows for other non-sanctioned interactions between users); the project served the purpose of image reparation through spaces such as the Abrahamian Garden. But there are other questions of accessibility that need to be answered, such as the difficulty to access the hill without a car, taking us to key issues such as who can access such a space.

Clara Rivas Alonso (SpacePol, Université de Tours): Creating a comparative framework: the impact on women of gendered monuments in public spaces in Ankara and Abu Dhabi.

This presentation focused on examining the gender perspective within the spatial configuration of political symbols in Ankara and Abu Dhabi, particularly highlighting the patriarchal nature of power representation through monuments in capital cities. The research aims to explore how women navigate and interact with these gendered political symbols in public spaces, specifically comparing two public monuments in Ankara and Abu Dhabi as emblematic cases: Güven Monument in Ankara and Mamsha Al Khair in Abu Dhabi. By analysing the accessibility and usage of public spaces surrounding key monuments, the research seeks to understand the impact of these symbols on women's perceptions of their place in these capital cities and their relationship with it.



Monuments serve as vessels of nationalist rhetoric, attributing figures with gender, race, and class to assert control, suppress historical narratives, and shape national identity. Alviso-Marino's work (Alviso-Marino and al-Ghunaim, 2020; Alviso-Marino, 2023) sheds light on the role of

women and visual artists in shaping a nation's history, emphasizing the importance of understanding the material and symbolic uses of monuments in urban spaces. In analysing the Güven monument in Ankara, it's essential to consider its role beyond merely presenting a fixed narrative. As Batuman suggests, the monument was (and is) an active agent in shaping new and ambivalent subjectivities, contributing not just to identity formation but also to the construction of social space (Batuman, 2005). This perspective challenges traditional views of monuments as static symbols, highlighting their dynamic influence on urban landscapes and the individuals who inhabit them. In the context of Abu Dhabi and the public space where Mamsha Al Khair is placed, Laure Assaf's analysis underscores the corniche's significance as not only a physical display but also a social and cultural representation of Abu Dhabi's diversity and dynamism (Assaf, 2013). Serving as a national stage, it plays a pivotal role in the city's visibility both internally and externally, hosting public events such as the national day parade, where citizens express their patriotism (Assaf, 2013).

By engaging directly with the subjects in the presence of symbolic monuments, the research aims to capture nuanced perspectives and spatial experiences. In Ankara, many women feel uncomfortable near the monument due to unwanted stares, particularly from men. They discuss how the monument, representing the state, influences their national and gender identity perceptions, reinforcing traditional roles. Over time, perceptions have shifted, with women now more aware of gender dynamics. Some seek to challenge traditional narratives by creating new urban spaces alongside or reinterpreting the monument.

While fieldwork in Abu Dhabi is still ongoing as this paper is being presented, it can already be noted the significant role of intersectionality in analysing interview results. Despite the differences between these two cases, a reflection point has been identified: the Abu Dhabi fieldwork underscores the importance of ethnicity, race, and class as pivotal factors that should also inform the analysis of responses to the monument in Ankara.



Image taken by Roman Stadnicki.