

In the footsteps of Ibn Battuta: Consumption and identity-making

Menelusuri Jejak Ibnu Battuta: Konsumsi dan Pembinaan Identiti

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Abstract

In line with growing prosperity, shopping malls mushroomed in most major cities. These malls have concentrated retail activities in private space while simultaneously replacing the public functions of the street. These new retail outlets have given an opportunity for the urban elites to congregate in new spaces of conspicuous consumption. In addition, there is an increasing tendency to construct these new retail spaces as *hyperreal* spaces. To illustrate, this article takes on the example of Ibn Battuta Mall (IBM), Dubai. Dubai is competing with other cities in the Muslim world, such as Kuala Lumpur, to be a model for Muslim modernity. In a conscious effort to create a truly Muslim place, IBM has been themed around the travels of renowned 14th century Muslim explorer Ibn Battuta whose journeys had taken him to all the Arab lands and beyond, even as far as to China. The IBM mall, while functioning as a retail outlet, is organized around various Muslim-inspired architectural styles originating from the Maghreb to China. IBM's six courts signify the most influential places he travelled to – China, India, Egypt, Persia, Tunisia and Andalusia (Muslim Spain). *Hyperreal* spaces are made to function as symbolic capital in the global competition for recognition. Towards this end, *hyperrealities* are then often sought to convey a new image of place.

Keywords

retail, urban, muslim, Ibn Battuta, hyperreal, hyperrealities

Abstrak

Kompleks membeli-belah di bandar-bandar besar tumbuh seperti cendawan selepas hujan seiring dengan peningkatan kuasa membeli pengguna. Kompleks tersebut memusatkan aktiviti perniagaan runcit dalam ruang persendirian dan sekaligus menggantikan jalanan sebagai tempat tumpuan awam. Ruang-ruang perniagaan runcit ini memberi peluang kepada kumpulan elit bandar untuk berkumpul dalam ruang-ruang konsumsi ketara (*conspicuous consumption*). Selain itu, terdapat peningkatan kecenderungan untuk membina ruang-ruang komersial baru yang bersifat hiperreal (*hyperreal*). Kajian ini menggunakan Ibn Battuta Mall (IBM), Dubai sebagai contoh untuk menjelaskan kecenderungan ini. Dubai sedang bersaing dengan bandar-bandar lain di dunia Islam seperti Kuala Lumpur untuk muncul sebagai model kemodenan Islam. Dalam usaha bersungguh-sungguh untuk membentuk tempat Islam sejati, tema pembinaan IBM dikaitkan dengan penjelajah Islam terkemuka abad ke 14, Ibnu Battuta, yang

telah mengembara merentasi dunia Islam ketika itu dari Semenanjung Tanah Arab sehingga melewati negara China. Yang demikian, kompleks IBM yang berfungsi sebagai ruang membeli-belah direkabentuk bersandarkan inspirasi gaya senibina Islam dari Maghribi sehingga China. Enam dewan perniagaan utama IBM membayangkan pengaruh negara-negara utama dalam dunia ketika itu – China, India, Mesir, Iran, Tunisia dan Sepanyol. Ruang hiperreal dibina untuk berfungsi sebagai modal simbolik dalam persaingan mendapatkan pengiktirafan global. Sehubungan itu, *hyperrealities* sering digunakan untuk membawa imej baru sesuatu tempat.

Kata kunci

perniagaan runcit, bandar, muslim, Ibnu Battuta, hiperreal, hyperrealities

Introduction

Retail consumption, especially over the last three decades, has been a major component of the urban scene in almost all cities throughout the world. In Southeast Asia, capitalist involvement in the retail sector can be traced to the presence of colonial department stores then mainly serving the expatriate community (Rimmer & Dick, 2009). The progression from shopping centres to plazas took place in the 1980s. It was only in the 1990s that new complexes built were large enough to merit the status of malls. These new malls bundle together department stores with supermarkets, boutiques, cinemas, food courts and other forms of entertainment. Malls have concentrated activities in private space and to some extent, also succeeded in substituting for the public functions of the street. The malls enable the urban middle-class elites, who congregate in capital cities, to use their economic and political strength to sustain comfortable lifestyles of conspicuous consumption. In this, the mall is seen as a microcosm of the city (Rimmer & Dick, 2009).

Similarly, within other major cities in the world, malls have been designed to appeal to all consumers especially the young. Increasingly, modern shopping mall design is focused on influencing consumer behaviour and encouraging consumption. Margaret Crawford (1992) writing in 'The World in a Shopping Mall' as quoted by Elsheshtawy (2010):

“Inside the mall presents a dizzying spectacle of attraction and diversion... Confusion proliferates at every level; past and future collapse meaninglessly into the present; barriers between real and fake, near and far, dissolve as history, nature, technology, are differently processed by the mall's fantasy machine”.

Consumption is tied to the notion of identity construction. Crawford viewed that 'consumption increasingly constructs the way we see the world' (Rimmer & Dick, 2009). Certain retail strategies, besides the actual physical design of the mall, further encourage consumption, for example, indirect commoditisation which is the placing

of non-saleable objects and images in the commoditised world of the mall. Placing an ordinary pot in a window display of a Moroccan souk transforms the pot into something exotic, mysterious and desirable.

“... for many the very construction of the self involves the acquisition of commodities. If the world is understood through commodities, then personal identity depends on one’s ability to compose a coherent self-image through the selection of a distinct personal set of commodities’ (Rimmer & Dick, 2009).

Mall design can also incorporate fantasy, juxtaposing shopping with an intense spectacle of accumulated images and themes that entertain and stimulate and in turn encourage more shopping. Crawford added that the shopping experience is enhanced as the shoppers are enclosed with space, time and weather suspended. Due to the connection between unexpected settings and familiar products, the shopping experience is further ‘reinvigorated’.

The term that has come to be widely used to conceptualize the growing (con)fusion of the real and imagined is *hyperreality*. The term hyperreality is typically attributed to the Italian philosopher Umberto Eco and the French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard. According to these scholars, a thing becomes *hyperreal* when it appears to be real although it is not. Hyperrealities are based on imitation of reality. Jean Baudrillard, drew attention to the induced blurring of the boundaries between the “real” and the “imagined”. Eco (1986) describes, in *Travels in Hyperreality*, the process of *hyperrealisation* as the construction of something more than real, as something that appears to be more real than its archetype. In Eco’s words, we are increasingly immersed in a sea of “real-fakes” and “absolutely fake cities”, reconstituted fantasy worlds that are “more real than reality”. Further, Eco’s *hyperreal* travels hinge around what he calls “the precession of simulacra”, the cumulative replacement of the real (world) by its simulated representations or images, a process which he claims has reached its highest stage in places such as Southern California.

An example of a *hyperreal* place in the sense of Eco is the Ibn Battuta Mall (IBM), Dubai. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) ranks second after Hong Kong in recreational shopping. Hence, real estate development in Dubai is dominated by malls. Dubai Mall, set as part of the Burj Khalifa development, is set to become the world’s biggest mall. Dubai’s retail landscape is thus spectacular in two respects: the sheer size and scale of its mega-malls and the particular themes which are adopted by these malls, designed in a way that entices consumers by offering them an ‘experience’. As malls proliferate, developers turned to the notion of ‘theming’ to offer the consumer a sort of experience based on a certain theme (eg. oriental souq in Madinat Jumeirah) or to link with specific event (winter landscape and ski slope at the Mall of the Emirates) or even utilizing history as a theme. History as a theme has been developed, it is said, to the extreme at IBM (Elsheshtawy, 2010). Nakheel, the public company, is responsible for the development of IBM. IBM is conventional in layout, one storey high, half a

mile long, and its layout is divided into zones. Exhibition of items relating to Arab culture, interactive exhibitions and replicas of famous artefacts are displayed and help to complete an image of a cultural centre in the midst of a shopping mall. The history behind the theme is in the person of the renowned traveller Ibn Battuta.

Ibn Battuta: The Man

In 1325 Ibn Battuta left Tangiers at the age of 21 to make his first hajj to Makkah about 3000 miles east. When he returned in 1349, his journeying had taken him to all Arab lands, Russia, Turkey, Persia, India and China. He spent a further 3 years in Spain and then made his last journey to west-central Africa. In 1354 the great traveller was ordered to dictate a record of his wanderings to a court scribe. However, it was only in the 19th century when his *Rihla* (Travels) was discovered in Algeria, did the account of his travels begin to receive attention.

Ibn Battuta travelled across land with a caravan visiting cities along the North African coast: Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, Alexandria and several smaller cities. Tunis was a major city of learning besides being a shipping port for North African products. He then continued to Cairo, the largest capital of the Arab-speaking world and the largest city anywhere in the world at that time except China. Cairo was founded by the Fatimid dynasty in the 10th century. From Cairo Ibn Battuta toured through the Levant, where he joined a caravan of pilgrims bound for Makkah. He made the Hajj to Makkah seven times. On his second trip, he stayed in Makkah three years to study with the great Muslim scholars. The pilgrimage was preceded by a tour of Persia, including a visit to the then fabled capital of Islam, Baghdad.

Ibn Battuta arrived in Persia in 1326 from Makkah where he joined a caravan of pilgrims. In Isfahan, he met with religious scholars. In Baghdad, which was once the capital of the Abbasid Empire, he saw many buildings destroyed by the Mongol invasion. His last stop in Persia was Tabriz, which became an important place on the Silk Route. At the end of three years of study in Makkah, Ibn Battuta set out for India, where he hoped to join the court of the powerful Sultan of Delhi. Delhi was the new capital city of India around 1323, under the rule of Sultan Muhammad Tughluq. After touring through Egypt, Syria, Turkey and Russia, Ibn Battuta finally reached Delhi where he remained in the sultan's service as *qadi* (judge) for eight years. Sultan Tughluq sent him as an ambassador to China. He proceeded to Calicut, a trading port. Mishaps happened and he ended up a *qadi* in nearby Maldivian Islands.

When Ibn Battuta finally sailed again for China, he landed at Zaytun (which may be the island of Amoy). Ibn Battuta's descriptions as cited in an article include, "Zaytun is an immense city..., the port of Zaytun is one of the largest in the world. I saw about a hundred large junks...". He made it to Guangzhou in the Fujian Province. He travelled as far north to Hangzhou near Shanghai. He journeyed from Zaytun to Hangchow and Peking and back. Noted Ibn Battuta, "There are no people in the world wealthier than the Chinese". Hangchow was described as the "biggest city I have ever seen" (Ibn

Battuta Traveller, 1961).

On his way back, he passed once again through Makkah and Baghdad, and in 1348 stopped at Damascus. The Black Plague was raging through the Middle East, and Ibn Battuta reported a daily death toll of 21000 in Cairo, later confirmed by historians. After he returned to Tangiers in 1349, he then went to Spain where he spent three years. When Umayyad rule began in southern Spain, Andalusia became one of the greatest centres of civilization. By the time Ibn Battuta visited Andalusia (1350), the Muslim civilisation was in decline. He visited the cities of Malaga, Alhama and Granada. Granada was a shining star of Andalusia with beautiful courtyards, fountains and courts. After that he travelled through west-central Africa and visited Timbuktu. In 1354, Ibn Battuta was called to Fez by his Sultan, who ordered him to dictate a record of his journeys.

Ibn Battuta: The Mall

The following description of the main shopping halls found within the Ibn Battuta Mall relied mainly on the information extracted from the Ibn Battuta Mall website www.ibnbattutamall.com. There are altogether six courts. However, the three courts of China, India and Persia have been done on a grander scale than the other three.

China Court

The Forbidden City and the Chaotian Palace in China were the inspiration for the exterior design of China Court. The colossal entrance-gate is to be compared to Shenwu Gate in the Forbidden City in Beijing complete with the typical glazed ceramic tile roofs of China (Photo 1). Like the temples and palaces in China, the spaces in the China Court are large and extravagant. Red, which represents good fortune and wealth to the Chinese, is the dominant colour. The Entrance Corridor, with multi-tiered white marble beams, leading to the Main Court is supposed to remind one of the enigmatic



Photo 1 China court entrance

stone gates of ancient China. The coffered ceiling with stylistic floral motifs is based on the ceiling of the 'Temple of the Five Immortals' in Guangzhou.

The China Court is made up of the Minor Court and the Main Court. In the Minor Court, the 'Temple of Heaven' in Beijing was used as a reference and is evident in the elaborate ceiling structure. The coffered ceiling is considered to be the most spectacular as found at the gates of the Forbidden City. The Main Court is a huge colonnaded hall also based on buildings found at the Forbidden City. The huge lacquered columns give the Court an imposing quality. Between each column is a huge medallion displaying a dragon in brilliant colour. These medallions were inspired by designs found on a Chinese drum in Beijing's Drum Tower.

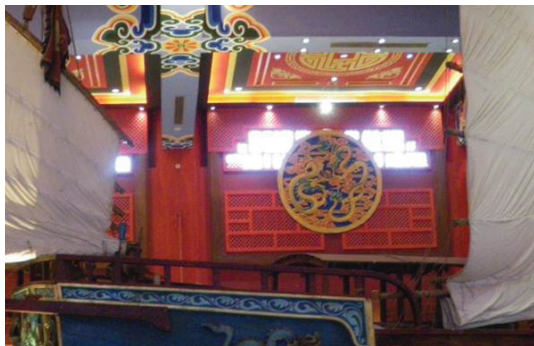


Photo 2 Chinese junk replica

A huge replica of the Chinese junk is the centrepiece feature in the Main Court (Photo 2). The Chinese developed it into one of the strongest and most seaworthy vessels in those times. Ibn Battuta was said to have sailed on one of these to China. The Main Court also tells the story of perhaps the greatest navigator of the Far East: Zheng He. As Admiral of the Chinese Fleet in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, he would sail to East Africa, Makkah, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

India Court

When Islamic culture arrived in India in the 12th century, the pointed arch, the vault and the true dome, together with decorative themes based on calligraphy and the arabesque and geometric patterns were introduced (Photo 3). This merged with the indigenous Hindu styles to bring about Indo-Islamic architectural style. Indo-Islamic architectural style is recognised by the extensive use of red sandstone and white marble.

The tomb of Humayun was used as reference for the exterior of the court. The white marble domes and the four corner pavilions are based on those of Taj Mahal. The Main Court has an airy and light design. A polished white marble finish was used exclusively reminiscent of the Pearl Mosque at the Red Fort in Delhi. The colossal dome was inspired by the one at Taj Mahal. Double columns, like those found at the



Photo 3 The arch and dome



Photo 4 The elephant clock

Agra Fort support the structure. The Elephant Clock is the interactive exhibit paying tribute to Al-Jazari, one of the greatest Muslim inventors (Photo 4). The Elephant Clock works on the principles of water-related mechanics and the one placed in this court is said to be an accurate re-creation of the drawings in Al-Jazari's 'The Book of Ingenious Mechanical Devices'.

Persia Court

The bazaar is one of the classic defining features of an Islamic town. The market-like environment was achieved by the use of cross-vaulted ceilings separated by glazed brick arches. Colourful mosaics, made from glazed tiles with abstract and arabesque designs, decorate the wall spaces. The brass lanterns used are typical of the ones found in *madrasa* and mosque of Iran and Iraq. The main feature of the Main Court is an enormous dome. The dome has a spectacular design based on the design of a Persian carpet. The design also pays tribute to the beautiful dome design of Turkish mosques. A gigantic brass chandelier hangs in the centre (Photo 5).

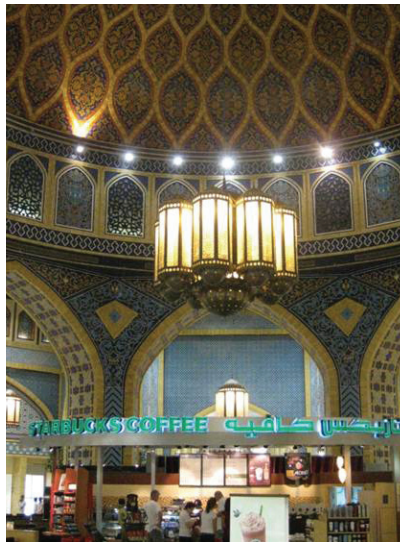


Photo 5 A hanging chandelier

Egypt Court

The overall design of the Major Court was based on Islamic architecture of the Mamluk period in Egypt. The large arcade with pointed arches, stucco plastered finish, and a heavy wood-framed ceiling, are striking features (to compare with Ibn Tulun's Great Mosque in Cairo). Two medallions that adorn the central arch that lead to the Minor Court are borrowed from courtyard facade of the al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo. Oblong "windows" of light latticed mashrabiya work break up the facade and is a common feature in Mamluk Egypt. Conical wall sconces and majestic lanterns made of brass light up the court to create a true bazaar-like ambience. Elaborate metalwork artifacts such as cast bronze lamps found all over the Islamic world.



Photo 6 Walls with carved hieroglyphics

Ibn Battuta was said to have visited many cities along the Nile on his way to Makkah. The Minor Court and Exterior of IBM tried to recapture the architectural age of the Pharaohs. “Papyrus” – columns flank the walls on either side of the exterior. The sandstone walls are adorned with carved hieroglyphics (Photo 6). The exterior features a stucco wall with Mamluk-style crenellations adorning the parapet. Meanwhile, the idea for the design of the concourse was to create a typical Egyptian market-like environment. Tops of shop facades are adorned with crenulations. The walls are sandstone or stucco-plastered with a mashrabiya window or a wooden balcony added for variation. Earthy colours were chosen and freestanding streetlamps and a sky ceiling create the feeling of an Egyptian street scene.

Tunisia Court

The Main Court has a village-like environment based on the coastal towns of Tunisia and Carthage. Whitewashed stucco buildings with blue painted doors and windows help recreate the picturesque narrow streets and souks of a typical African market place (Photo 7). Inspiration for the tile-work is derived from Moroccan Palaces and madrasas. Along with Tunisian stained glass windows add colour and life to the buildings. City gateways had stone arches resting on limestone columns.



Photo 7 Narrow streets and souks

The “ribat” (fortress) at Monastir and at Sousse have been the main inspiration for the Food Court Wall. The gateways borrow from typical Moroccan and Tunisian gateways to Royal Palaces or market places. Huge terracotta vases add an impressive finishing touch. In the concourse, one can see the vibrant design on the vaulted ceiling. The limestone pillars are typically found all over Tunisia/Morocco.

Andalusia Court

The Great Mosque of Cordoba and the Alhambra Palace in Granada were the main sources of inspiration for the design of the Andalusia Court. The lofty halls, accentuated with rows of arches, create a sense of elevated space. “Horseshoe arches” with alternating red brick and white stone, are a characteristic feature of Andalusian architecture.

The central feature of the Main Court is the “Lion Fountain” based on the fountain in the “Court of the Lions” in the Alhambra Palace (Photo 8). A majestic brass chandelier hangs in the centre. On the exterior, the red stone walls and terracotta tile roof give a distinct Spanish feel to the court similar to the Alhambra. The pointed battlements on top of the walls were common features found on palace or city walls.



Photo 8 The lion fountain

Reflecting Identities

In an observation by Steiner (2009), it ‘seems many appreciate the (IBM) mall for its authentic beauty’. In considering the notion of the mall as a meeting place, a ‘third space’ as defined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg, the position of IBM as a ‘third space’ is confirmed; it is not merely a space for consumption, but offers users a place where they can display their ethnicity, engage in various work related activities, or simply socialize (Elscheshtawy, 2010). The consumers actively adapt the spectacular space to shape their own perceptions and expectations.

- i. Entrances are, in some instances, used to create a sort of public space rarely seen in the city. The entrance from the Chinese court side leads to a larger

space on to which open a series of restaurants. The whole setting has the feel of a pleasant courtyard.

- ii. The whole notion of the mall as a community centre takes on an interesting dimension with numerous groups of people interacting in the mall's public spaces, sitting areas and cafes.
- iii. Visitors are seen in active engagements with the displays at the exhibition stands, especially at the Egypt court which contain a variety of objects related to various regions, eg. engagement with maps by the numerous expatriate workers visiting the mall.

Nonetheless, in the ongoing urban experiments in creating *hyperrealities*, there are numerous resort complexes and shopping malls built that increasingly lack spatial, historical and social embeddedness. Examples given by Steiner (2009) are sport facilities such as Ski Dubai hall which resemble materialised paradoxes of *hyperrealities*, bringing 'snow and skiing' to a society in the desert. Elsewhere in the United States, new real estate developments have been imaginatively packaged as "Variations on a Theme Park," involving creations of packaged *hyperreal* worlds of simulated cultures, urban communities, lifestyles, and consumer preferences liken to a visit to Disneyland, with Fantasyland, Adventureland, Frontierland, Tomorrowland, Toon Town, or Disney World in tow. There are residential developments and "urban villages" for people who wish to live in replicas of Greek Island (Mykonos), old New England, or Spanish Colonial revivals.

As *hyperrealities* typically lack spatial, historical, and social embeddedness, it is possible to understand them in a semiotic way as a type of "empty significant" (Laclau 2002 in Steiner, 2009) without a historically and socially-defined meaning. As signs that have lost their significant relationship to the signified, *hyperrealities* can signify anything. This is precisely why *hyperrealities* can bear any meaning that their developers wish. *Hyperrealities* are the ultimate vehicle to create and convey a new image of place. It is the *hyperreal* character of the new urban spaces that ideally fits marketing requirements. A good example of this type of marketing-friendly *hyperrealities* is iconic buildings. Iconic buildings are erected in order to create and point to a distinct destination image and identity that did not previously exist. Steiner (2009) pointed to the Palm Islands as well as The World archipelagos, Dubai as archetypes of *hyperrealities*, of being perfect examples of symbols that became objects.

Conclusion

Over the last decade or so, there was perhaps little to reflect a distinctive Muslim architecture in the urban landscape of Dubai with the exception perhaps of the Jumeirah Masjid, built in neo-Mamluk architectural style borrowed from Cairo. In this century, the sudden growth in spectacular mega real-estate projects had served to fuel

the rapid economic growth of Dubai. However, this has often resulted in the veiling of its Muslim identity. Hence, much hope has been placed on the Ibn Battuta Mall project, not only to serve as a retail outlet, but also to evoke a kind of Muslim identity that has been lacking hitherto in the earlier mega-projects.

We have thus seen that *hyperrealities* have a key function, performing a particular destination image and attempting to gain international attention. They can be interpreted as materialised symbolic capital (Bourdieu in Steiner 2009). Symbolic capital can be defined as the sum of cultural and social recognition. The accumulation of symbolic capital is a necessary means to succeed in the global competition for recognition and prestige. The political value of symbolic capital appears to be even higher if symbolic capital is manifested in the form of *hyperrealities*. As self referential systems of signs, *hyperrealities* do not point to a corresponding reality, but to the elites who created and owned them. Hence, the more *hyperreal* urban spaces become, the more they will contribute to the stabilisation of given structures of power and rule.

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