

The Traders of Bastak

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Abstract

Dubai's historical Bastakiya quarter gets its name from Bastak, Iran; the origin of many textile and pearl traders who first plied their trades in what would become the UAE. The architectural contributions from Bastak are wind towers, courtyards, and wooden carved doors. Those elements are constructed to become places, they are designed to add value to the purpose an area serves for human engagement and needs. Al Bastakiya is also home to the only Islamic geometric pattern found in the UAE, it is believed that it originated from Irahestan, a historical region consisting of southern Fars province and western Hormozgan province in Iran. Yet de-coding the geometric patterns' construction and their profound philosophical role is knowledge that is less well known than the origins. Geometric patterns encourage observation of creation, beauty, and, most importantly, the infinite. Patterns adorn our surroundings to support the spiritual life, to instill a way of perceiving the world, and to engage the viewers in a visual and universal language. Geometry helps the believer to reflect on the greatness of creation, patterns are believed to be the bridge to the mystical realm, and the instrument to purify the soul.

Keywords: Heritage, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Geometric Patterns

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Introduction

The work will analyze, decompose, and uncover the mystery of the only geometric pattern of the Al Bastakiya historical district, and perhaps modernize it, this is to engage the viewers in a visual deliberation and graphical debate.

The Traders of Bastak

Al Bastakiya, also known as Al Fahidi, sits on the northeast coast of the United Arab Emirates, it is the old district in Dubai that establishes the early culture of the people and holds the memoirs of an era that pre-dates the Federation of the Emirates. It was built in the late 1800s for immigrants migrating from Bastak in Persia.

The families that lived in the Bastakiya originated from the region of Bastak in southern Iran, its name suggests a barrier or perhaps a place of security. The town itself has a population of 10,000. The neighboring area is largely rural encompassing some eighty villages, and home to a population of about 18,000. There are still testaments reflecting the lives of its wealthy families in the past, not least the house of the late Khans, and their court (Coles and Jackson 2007, p. 22).

The Creek

Khor Dubai (Dubai Creek in English) is a natural seawater bay of the Arabian Gulf located in the heart of Dubai with 14 kilometers in length and between 100-500 meters in width that runs southeast and ends at Ras Al-Khor. The creek divides the city into two parts: Bur Dubai and Deira, and has played a major role in the economic development of the region throughout history. The creek was likely the actual *raison d'être* of Dubai's creation and early development as a trading port; the starting point for which could perhaps be taken as 1833, when some 800 members of the Bani Yas tribe, led by Sheikh Maktoum bin Buti Al-Falasi, established in the Bur Dubai area, at the mouth of the creek (Unesco, 2012).

The creek, a safe, natural harbor with the potential to become a flourishing port centered on pearl diving, and trade, was the obvious choice for the early settlers. Indeed, fishing, another main "industry" at the time, also thrived along the creek, whose warm and shallow waters supported a diverse and rich marine life. For about a century, although it didn't allow the entry of large ships due to its limited depth, the creek has remained the only port in the city and the most important element in founding the commercial position of Dubai (Unesco, 2012).

Nonetheless the imposing growth of Modern Dubai for tens of kilometers along the seashore, the creek has remained the very "heart" of the city. Along the creek and the seashore are still found the traditional boat-building areas where large wooden boats are built, restored, and preserved by skilled workers.

Three diverse residential areas emerged as the population of Dubai expanded: Deira, which was the main commercial district, Bur Dubai, and Shindagha, a strip of land separating the creek from the sea. The latter became the principal residential area and the place where the city leaders lived (Unesco, 2012).

Khor Dubai and its surrounding important neighborhoods constitute an outstanding and universally treasured site where natural, architectural, and cultural components create a unique urban landscape where influences and human interactions from the entire Gulf region mingle into a coherent and alive ensemble preserving both tangible and intangible heritage values (Unesco, 2012).

Khor Dubai's authenticity concerns mainly the actual waterway. The creek has conserved both its physical appearance and its financial and social function as the main commercial axis linking Dubai with the rest of the Gulf. The actual "spirit" of the place still fully exists, with the creek being the heart of the urban collective formed by the historic fort, specialized souqs, graceful mosques, and lively residential quarters associated with the constant cruising of traditional wooden boats carrying people and goods (Unesco, 2012).

At the architectural level, the authenticity is reflected in the efforts of the Architectural Heritage Department of Dubai Municipality, actively protecting the city's physical fabric, respecting the city form, and traditional building techniques and materials, and keeping wind towers as symbolic elements of the city skyline. The remaining historic structures and urban sectors have been preserved, and restored; when houses have been rebuilt, the reconstruction has been done on the basis of both material and intangible evidence (historic documents, oral history, and interviews with original residents), and according to globally recognized technical standards. Khor Dubai's historic urban landscape constitutes an authentic, thriving, and vibrant environment, where the multiple elements composing Dubai's identity are still found.

The integrity of the site and its elements are guaranteed by the existing legal measures for the protection of monuments and is overseen by the Architectural Heritage Department of the Municipality of Dubai (Unesco, 2012).

The Queen of Gems

Al Bastakiya came into being in the 19th century under the patronage of the Persian merchants who traded in pearls and textiles, and was used as a pit stop along foreign trade routes, including Persian routes to Rome, the Portuguese African routes, the British spice route to the Indian subcontinent, and the Silk Road to China.

For centuries, one gem was most desired around the world: The Queen of Gems, shining pearls from the Arabian Gulf. Harvested annually through intense labor from the waters of Dubai and its surroundings, pearling remained a pillar of the UAE's economy for millennia (Google, Arts and Culture, n.d.).



Figure 1. Wind Towers (El Tabbah, Wind Towers, 2023, Photograph, Al Bastakiya, Dubai)

Wind Towers

The little remains of the architecture of Bastak town are enough to prove the source of the architectural design of Bastakiya. There are no longer any wind towers existing in Bastak; these have all collapsed or been destroyed, following an earthquake fifty years ago and two major floods in 1977 and 1992 (Coles and Jackson 2007, p. 23).

The architecture of Bastakiya is influenced by Persian culture. It is interesting to note that they were the answer to the modern-day air conditioners which assisted in cooling the house against the summer elevated temperature. This structure placed on top of a building is a device of sustainability. These towers go higher than the rest of the building, their X-plan catches wind and draws it down the shaft into the space below, regulating air circulation and humidity, hence improving indoor thermal comfort through natural ventilation and passive cooling. Through winter, the wind towers are either closed at the bottom, or the rooms served by them are not occupied.



Figure 2. Courtyards (El Tabbah, Courtyards, 2023, Photograph, Al Bastakiya, Dubai)

Courtyards

Courtyards are perhaps the greatest architectural contribution from Bastak. Those elements are constructed to become places, they are designed to add value to the purpose an area serves for human privacy, family engagement, and their needs.

Courtyards are an open-air area surrounded by many small rooms, typically located at the center of the building. They are designed to invite daylight, which can revive humans and plants alike. Courtyards allow breezes to enter the building during hot summers, for this reason, they are popular in warmer climates. There were more than 60 houses that belonged to the traders' community. After the finding of oil, the majority of its inhabitants moved out to the modern city for an upgraded life leaving behind the old town of Bastakiya.

Traditional doors were made from imported timber, mainly from India. The main door to a traditional house is typically a double door, with a small door within one of the leaves, for privacy and daily routine. Some front doors are simple two-leaf doors that are engraved and showcase diverse details of metalwork studs, bolts, door knockers, and chains. By contrast, interior door hinges and locks are often wooden.

Geometric Patterns

A place worthy of note is Al Bastakiya Grand Mosque. Originally built in 1900, it was demolished and reconstructed in 1960 and then further rebuilt in 1998. The Mosque is home

to the only Islamic geometric pattern found in the area, it is believed that it originated from Irahestan.

By analyzing the pattern, a twelve-pointed star can be identified by counting the twelve petal shapes around the star, this is also right for all the geometric compositions that are created throughout the centuries. The geometric pattern screen at the Great Mosque of Bastakiya is part of the building facade, and the building itself is a part of the urban environment. It is designed to demonstrate visual gratification, depending on the daylight, and the distance of the individual from the building. This visual impact demonstrates an invitation to the viewers to enter the building gracefully, to embrace the light and the elements, when the call of prayer is delivered.

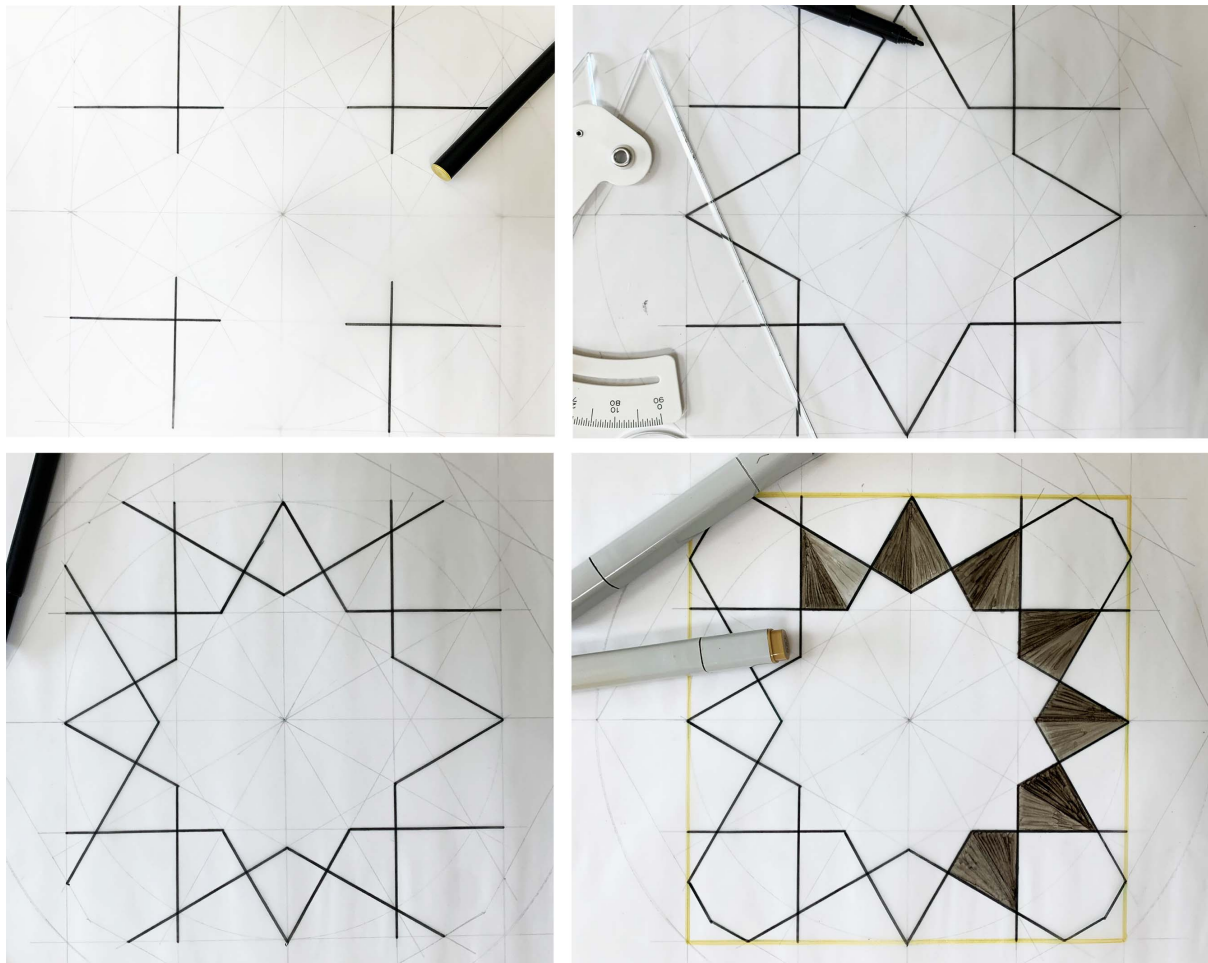


Figure 3. Drawing the patterns (Figure 3. El Tabbah, Drawing the patterns, 2023, Ink on papers)

As per the principles and rules, all geometric patterns are based on a circle, the circle symbolizes unity and diversity in nature. They go into an intersection to create the composition, while calculations and measurements are totally absent. It is what happens at further steps and beyond that creates the vast diversity of patterns.

Geometry is a product of rules and creativity, comprehending the rules and identifying them in a design unlock the way to a better understanding of the process and the creative choices that geometric designs suggest.

The basic elements of all geometric compositions are circles and straight lines. Lines are drawn by connecting other intersecting lines, circles are drawn by adjusting the radius to pass through other intersections. The circles move to “behind the scenes” role; yet, their importance in the construction of the pattern is unchanged. The creation of the geometric design generated by circles and lines has propelled the progress of geometric patterns over time, however, these patterns are almost rectilinear, and curved lines rarely appear in compositions.

The outcome is visible but not yet the creative process from a craftsman’s perspective. Geometric compositions offer visual layers for the viewers to discover, it is perceived by emphasizing certain aspects such as the application of materials, textures, and colors, this approach defines the creative practice in the design. The challenge facing the traditional artisan is how to build it with materials so as to best symbolize spirit.

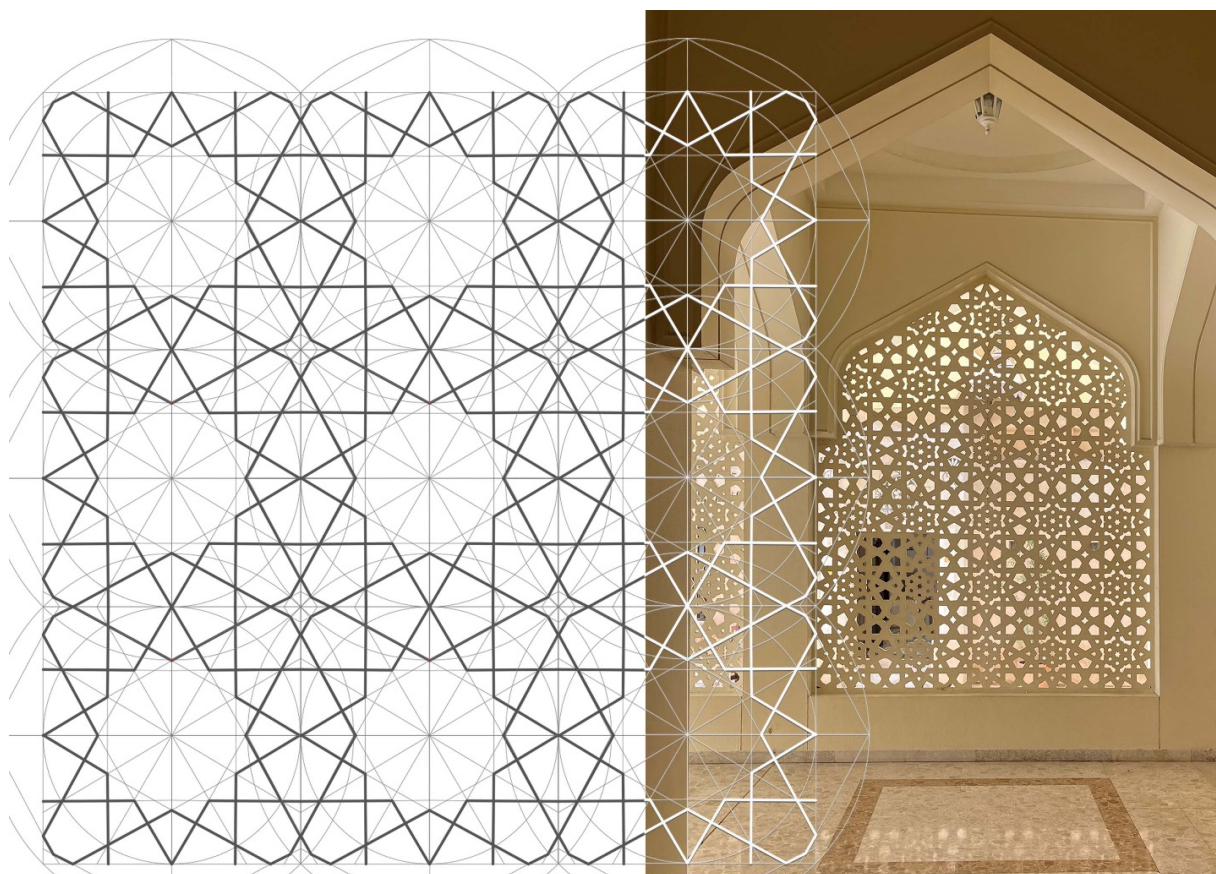


Figure 4. The invisible grid (El Tabbah, The invisible grid, 2023, Ink on paper, Photograph, Al Bastakiya, Dubai)

The grids are the invisible layers in the background that make the composition possible, with their specific proportion and symmetry, they help the pattern to fit perfectly in a certain space and also determine their scale. Those grids allow the creation of geometric design by tessellating the patterns to form a greater composition. Basically, if the composition is applied to a surface, it has to have particular dimensions to fit perfectly, it has to be designed in a precise way which makes it a great evidence of excellence in geometric design.

Geometric patterns encourage reflection on creation, and most importantly on the infinite. Patterns embellish our surroundings to support spiritual life, instill a way of observing the world, and engage the viewers in a visual and universal language.

The role of sacred art is to support the spiritual life of those whom it surrounds and to teach a way of perceiving the world and the delicate realities behind it.

Principles of inclusion, common respect, and religious freedom have been embedded in the United Arab Emirates' DNA since before the country's establishment in 1971, today, people of more than 200 nationalities reside in the UAE, living together, side by side. This diversity is reflected in the approximately 40 churches, two Hindu temples, a Sikh temple, and a Buddhist temple, which welcome multi-national congregations (Embassy of The United Arab Emirates, Washington, DC, n.d.).

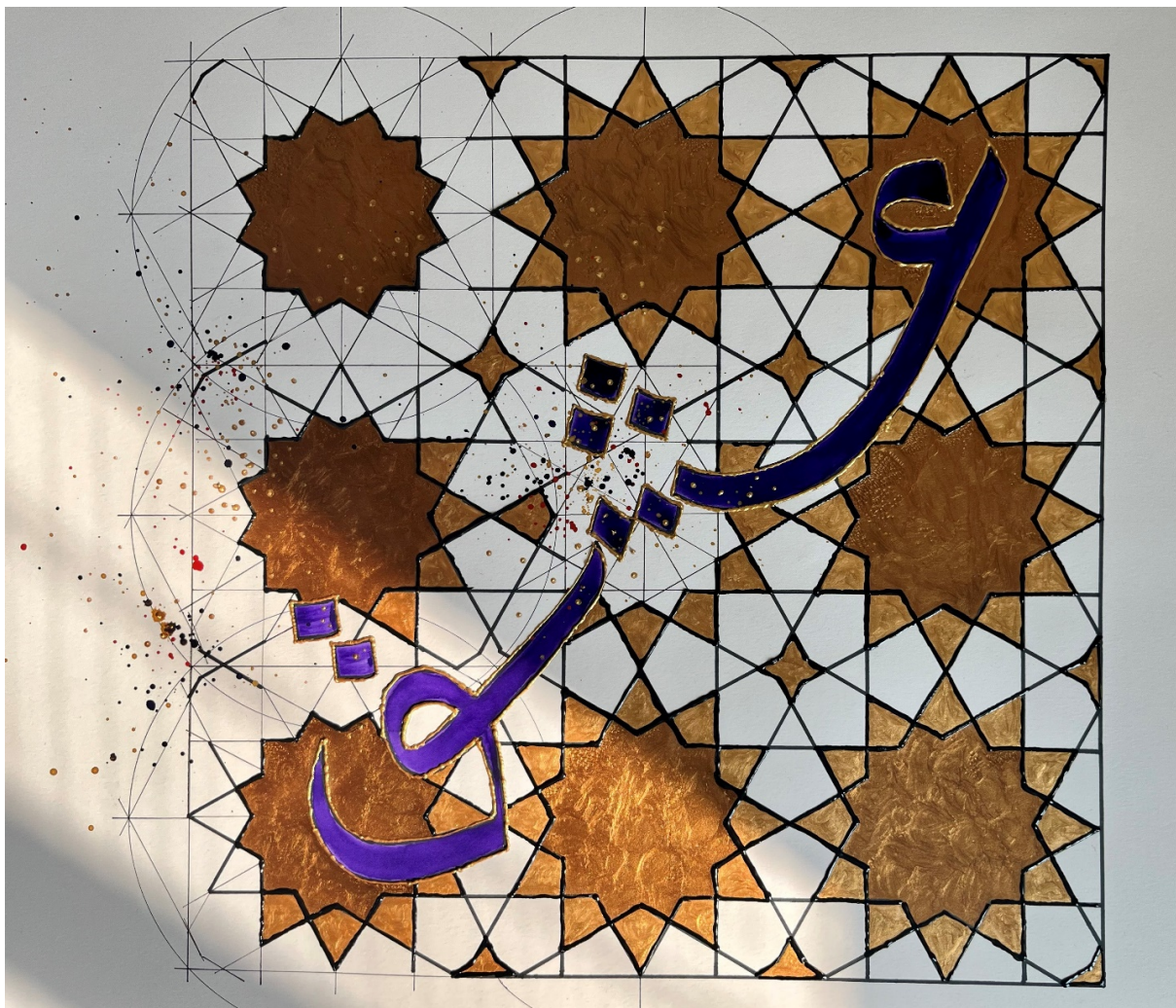


Figure 5. Ishq (Figure 5. El Tabbah, Ishq, 2023, Mixed media on paper)

Ishq

The word Ishq is made up of three letters: Ain, Sheen, and Qaaf, and it is an Arabic word meaning “Passionate love”, also widely used in other languages in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. In Sufi belief, Ishq comes into two levels, one is passing, while the other is eternal.

Conclusion

In a world torn by hatred and mistrust, nothing celebrates the collective human spirit and our capacity to share empathy and compassion with others as much as love. Ishq is one of few words that manages to transcend traditional language boundaries with its universal message of passionate love and sincere kindness.

This visual is a representation of our color diversity, and can only be celebrated when we pledge to understand one another, recognizing that our essential capacity to love is always greater than the outward differences people choose to exploit.

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