
A Flying Man, a Scuttled Ship, and a Timekeeping Device: Reflections on Ibn Battuta Mall

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Presenting itself as “revolutionizing the retail and entertainment experience in Dubai,” not only by “celebrating the travels of the famous Arabic explorer Ibn Battuta” but also through “the exciting mix of over 275 retailers, 50 restaurants and food outlets, 21 cinema screens including the UAE’s only IMAX theatre, and a continual array of events and promotions,” the Ibn Battuta Mall carves itself a niche in the commercial life of Dubai.¹ And yet the mall becomes a much more eloquent artifact when it is perceived to contain further layers of meaning, demanding an investigation of the spatial strategies produced, used, and represented therein.

Upon entering the Ibn Battuta Mall, consumers are encased within a series of representations that conjure some of the geographies that the fourteenth-century explorer Ibn Battuta claimed to have visited. This seemingly spectacular shell comprises six interconnected courts dedicated to Andalusia, Tunisia, Egypt, Persia, India, and China and conveys the cultural characteristics of these regions by applying general architectural motifs onto the walls and the floors and by situating iconic figures within the respective courts. While wandering through the mall’s different sections, visitors also come across replicas of ancient scientific inventions from these geographies, such as devices of celestial navigation, or may view displays detailing the development of music or numbers. Before they make their exit, consumers may take the Ibn Battuta quiz, administered by the mall, testing how much they have learned from this trip. Tim Mackintosh-Smith in his piece “Edutaining Dubai,” which appeared in a Gulf oil promotional magazine,

1. Ibn Battuta Mall website, www.ibnbattutamall.com (accessed April 18, 2011).

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shares an ethnographic moment, where he asks the waiters in the food court how well they fare in the quiz.² One waiter boasts how, after completing the quiz many times, he finally scored 100 percent.³ It is important not to completely dismiss the value of knowledge that is communicated in this manner, because it may carry the potential for inspiring different questions, interests, or prospects. Yet factual knowledge regarding the selected geographies becomes instrumental in manufacturing

the experience of shopping, helping create a distinctive atmosphere for the building interior.

In the mall, the ornamentation creates an environment of distant geographies and serves as a frame, or a background, that underpins the commercial interaction presented to the visitors in the foreground. The frame exists mostly at a level that remains unreachable for consumers, and although it is the producer of attraction, it is censored to conceal the apparent pastiche evident in its very materiality. And yet within the mall's controlled environment, this frame easily embodies normality, or at times something greater, better, or more interesting than normality.

In presenting this ornamental background, the mall withholds touch and instead brings forth sight. So while visitors are unable to touch the background of, say, the Persian dome to determine whether it is constructed of stone, they are able to register the associations for which the Persian dome is being used in the foreground. A Starbucks café is located beneath the dome, lending qualities initially associated with ancient Persia to the global coffee chain, and vice versa. As such, the architecture infuses impressions of cultural artifacts from ancient non-Western geographies with stark manifestations of global capitalism, embodied by different multinational stores, such as Starbucks. This phantasmagoric packaging not



Figure 1 Hear traditional music from China.
Photo courtesy of the author

2. Tim Mackintosh-Smith, “Edutaining Dubai,” *Saudi Aramco World*, March–April 2008, www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/200802/edutaining.dubai.htm. Mackintosh-Smith is a travel writer who in recent years has traced the footsteps of Ibn Battuta. In 2010 he visited Ibn Battuta Mall for a book signing, after the publication of *Landfalls: On the Edge of Islam with Ibn Battutah*, the final book in his trilogy.

3. Mackintosh-Smith, “Edutaining Dubai.”

only confuses and attracts consumers through what Susan Buck-Morss calls “flooding the senses,” but it also provides a case for the commodities being marketed and momentarily obfuscates, or even effaces, their use-values.⁴ In the meantime, as Buck-Morss, comparing this sensory intoxication with that of drugs, suggests,

everyone sees the same altered world, experiences the same total environment. As a result, unlike with drugs, the phantasmagoria assumes the position of objective fact. Whereas drug addicts confront a society that challenges the reality of their altered perception, the intoxication of phantasmagoria itself becomes the social norm. Sensory addiction to a compensatory reality becomes a means of social control.⁵

Besides serving as means of social control, these produced histories and geographies act as devices and manifestations of what Peter Sloterdijk would call “connected isolation” within the mall space.⁶ To construct an emergent artificial lifeworld within the desert, not only materials but also designs and building techniques have been imported, allowing and precipitating an imitation of cultural meanings. In the case of complete isolation, the absence of these prior cultural meanings could facilitate the production of more radical, and thus exciting, systems, such as endogenous languages or beliefs. But as Sloterdijk argues, “All current and future space-insulators will remain imitators, like their distant forefather Robinson Crusoe . . . [and] create things exclusively out of what they brought with them, just as he did. It goes without saying that conventional astronauts are far removed from being the pure consciousness of their island.”⁷ How do conventional astronauts construct such “absolute islands,” or spaces characterized by total isolation and made possible only because they have been artificially created? Sloterdijk posits that an analysis of such formation is anthropologically interesting because it uncloaks builders’ calculated and constructivist behavior

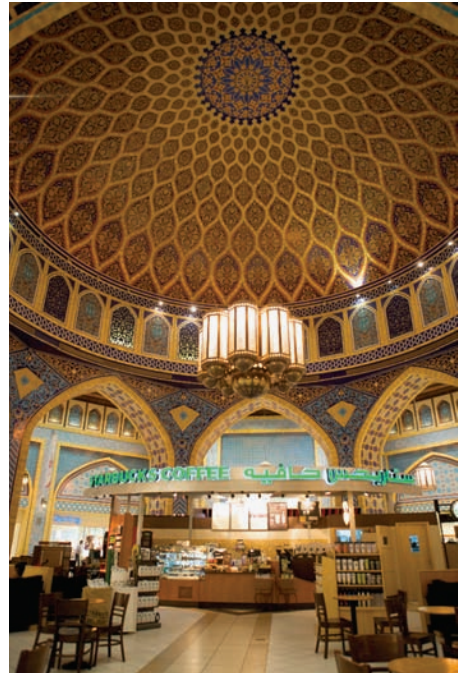


Figure 2 Persia Court.
Photo courtesy of the author

4. Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” *October* 62 (1992): 22.

5. Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” 22–23.

6. Peter Sloterdijk, “The Absolute Island,” in *Olafur Eliasson: Minding the World*, ed. Olafur Eliasson and Gitte Orskou (Denmark: ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, 2004), 161.

7. Sloterdijk, “Absolute Island,” 162.



Figure 3 “Good weather.” Photo courtesy of the author

under conditions where dispensing with preconceived notions of building is relatively more possible.

In a climate characterized by high temperatures and humidity levels during summer months, the Ibn Battuta Mall provides for its visitors consistently reliable “good weather,” the product of its air-conditioning system. Indoors, a blue sky and white clouds are painted on the false ceiling, making direct visual references to the environment that has been imagined and then duly installed within this building. Like an absolute island, the mall introduces an alternative cosmology to

visitors intent on education, entertainment, and shopping and insulates the space from any interaction with the outside. Seemingly subscribing to a post–World War II typology that claims consumers would be more easily enticed into shopping if the shops were located in an inward-facing building, the Ibn Battuta Mall does not contain any windows, terraces, or balconies. This effort seeks to create the inside as an indifferent and independent environment, while simultaneously producing the hopeless outside as a vacuum that should not be inhabited except in this manner. The production of an absolute island instigates an unquestionable hierarchy between the inside and the outside, through which the inside becomes clearly favored.

The “imagineering” attempts within the mall further establish these insulating hierarchies.⁸ Providing ample opportunity for role-playing, the mall fashions its

8. The imagineering consultants for the Ibn Battuta Mall were from MTE Studios, a South Africa–based firm that provides themed architecture services. During a conversation at the Cityscape Abu Dhabi Trade Show on April 11, 2011, an executive from MTE Studios explained that the master developer, Nakheel Properties, had approached the company to design a “more Arabic mall that has a story.” MTE Studios later came up with the six courts illustrating Ibn Battuta’s travels. At the end, huge spaces were left in the middle of the courts. The MTE Studios executive remarked that he had seen an illustration of the elephant clock in a manuscript and decided that it would be perfect for India Court. The iconic figures were later manufactured in MTE’s South Africa workshop and transported to Dubai. The executive also pointed out that frequent changes in the management following the economic recession have led to a lack of maintenance in the mall. “Because this is not a museum, when the management changes there is nothing you can do in regards to maintenance,” he concluded. MTE Studios’ other mall project in Dubai, called Mercato Mall, imitates a stereotypically Italian streetscape.

visitors as temporary travelers to abstract yet medieval geographies, capable of relocating from one region to another. In one sense, the mall wayfarers constitute curious versions of the medieval explorer, meandering from Tunisia to China, while momentarily dipping into India, unlike the medieval explorer, who bore discomfort, surprise, and hardship to visit the Far East, all of which have been exorcised from the contemporary experience. The mall shuttle only furthers these attempts by enabling consumers to rely on a transportation device: “For only AED 5 you can travel from China to Persia or China to Tunisia and vice versa.”⁹ Here Ibn Battuta’s world, rescaled to fit the distance of 1.3 kilometers (.81 miles), becomes an infrastructure seemingly suitable for figurative journeys to an acclaimed past.

This emergent temporality also shapes the iconic figures of the mall. In the Indian court, for instance, mall visitors can stand next to a life-size, gray, richly ornamented elephant, which as one of the mall’s main attractions is often surrounded by other visitors taking photographs. Used herein to represent India, the elephant is actually a pedestal for a full-size working reproduction of the “elephant clock,” designed by the polymath al-Jazari, who documented his wide range of ideas in his *Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices* (*Kitab fa ma’rifat al-hiyal al-handasiyya*) in 1206. Rather than stress the water clock’s significance within the histories of temporal measurements, or among al-Jazari’s mechanical oeuvres, the mock-up spotlights the decorative element. Here the ornamental foreground obscures the functionality of the water clock, sped up to concur with the tempo-



Figure 4 “Good weather,” continued. Photo courtesy of the author



Figure 5 The mall shuttle. Photo courtesy of the author

9. Ibn Battuta Mall website, www.ibnbattutamall.com (accessed April 18, 2011).



Figure 6 The elephant clock.
Photo courtesy of the author



Figure 7 The Chinese junk.
Photo courtesy of the author

rality of the mall. The water movement, which occurs every thirty minutes in the original design, is repeated every ten minutes to comply with the shorter attention spans of its viewers on the go.

In further highlighting the self-inclusive character of the mall, the China court features a Chinese junk, which appears to have precariously beached upon some rocks. A passageway cuts through the boat, scuttling it and thereby exposing the vessel's interior and transforming it into something that can be easily walked through. Like the presence of the elephant clock, which may be hinting at the scientific superiority of the non-West in producing devices for measuring time, the Chinese junk evokes a period in which these huge vessels dominated sea trade and transport. More important, the placement of the junk amid the Chinese court produces the effect of the mall as an ocean that provides opportunities for navigation and exploration, without putting the explorers at any considerable risk. By experiencing the insides of the junk, and thereby its potential fragility, perhaps the mall visitors are reminded of the safety of being anchored in the very area that surrounds this replica.

Finally, the suspended statue of Abbas Ibn Firnas, situated in the middle of the Tunisian court, also assists in constructing the mall as an absolute island immune to risks but still worthy of intense exploration. Here the ninth-century scientist, whose attempt at flight using a set of wings was among the first documented, is captured possibly a few seconds after jumping off a wall. Although it is often claimed that his experiment ended with a tragic crash, the suspended papier-mâché figure does not inform mall visitors of his fated future. The mall space thus acts as a safety net, catching him while in midair and also keeping mall visitors immune from the potential risks of exploration. On foot or via the mall shuttle, visitors may survey a space that merits gliding through. The manufactured mall environment is decorated not only with blue skies and white clouds but also with humans playing at being birds, thereby invoking scientific experiments that border on the magical. Once again, the mall space is framed as a secure space with much exploratory potential, much more interesting than anything mall visitors may find outside, in the vacuum.

This illustrated travelogue simultaneously functions as a memorial for Ibn Battuta, who by traveling for almost thirty years across many Muslim and perhaps some non-Muslim geographies of the fourteenth century, and more important by later documenting his journey, is claimed to have brought about an Islamic spatial consciousness and contributed to the creation of an abstraction called the Muslim world. Accordingly, by representing this journey within the space of a mall, the city of Dubai acquires a new centrality and curatorial and artistic rights to exhibit a seemingly objective reality of an Islamic world.¹⁰ But then again, Ibn Battuta's intentions in picking travel destinations within the Islamic world are argued to have been merely pragmatic, especially because within this circuit, many respected his desire to seek out distant sources of spiritual wisdom and did not question his intentions for journeying. Even though the journey itself included moments where Ibn Battuta tried to "correct" the Islamic practices of the people he encountered, he never



Figure 8 Flying Ibn Firnas.
Photo courtesy of the author

10. This argument is inspired by an analysis of world fairs found in Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 1–34.

understood his journey to have clear didactic, or missionary, goals. All in all, it is argued that this medieval explorer simply traveled for the sake of traveling.¹¹

In this sense, Ibn Battuta's journeys were very different from the European circumnavigation or mapmaking expeditions that by and large contributed to the art of travel writing and facilitated the production of a planetary consciousness in Europe.¹² But when his travelogue is overlapped with a series of scientific innovations that took place in the non-Western world before he started journeying—the elephant clock of the thirteenth century, the Chinese junks of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, or the flight of Ibn Firnas in the ninth century—his travels begin to represent a period of discovery and exploration within the non-West. One may argue therefore that one of the objectives of exhibiting devices that were first used in the lands in which Ibn Battuta traveled is to propose a non-Western historical narrative of geographical exploration and technological innovation. Accordingly, the space of the mall itself, by acting as a shell for these devices and a cenotaph for Ibn Battuta, is to be understood as the natural conclusion of the multiple advances that are represented therein. Just like these advancements, the Ibn Battuta Mall is to be interpreted as another of the non-West's successes, which will be of much significance historiographically. In this sense, the distinction between the actual mall building and the devices housed within it, including the multiple representations of Ibn Battuta, is seemingly diminished further. Although they traverse different histories and geographies, they all constitute different articulations of claims to a superiority that is characteristic of the style of urbanism one witnesses throughout Dubai.

Despite its seemingly unremitting hierarchical relationship with its outside, the mall shares its capitalistic inside with many other spaces, including but not limited to many segregated zones within Dubai. Sloterdijk argues that capitalism is a system that regulates all living conditions within the spheres it sequesters.¹³ These spheres, although they do not always have visible walls and gates, are protected, strengthened, and established through boundaries, which simultaneously create a specific inner climate for capitalism and render it nontraversable. The

11. L. P. Harvey, *Ibn Battuta* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007). See also Fathi A. El-Shihibi, "Travel Genre in Arabic Literature: A Selective Literary and Historical Study" (PhD diss., Boston University, 1998).

12. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1994).

13. Peter Sloterdijk, *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals (In the Inner World Space of Capital)* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005), 26; Sloterdijk, *Kapitalist dünyanın iç-evreninde (In the Inner World Space of Capital)*, trans. İlknur Aka (Istanbul: Kırmızı, 2008).

modus operandi of the capitalist apartheid regime seeks to render poverty invisible within corridors of wealth, ensuring that communities with purchasing power remain disconnected from the impoverished both materially and conceptually.¹⁴ As such, Sloterdijk suggests, “the inner space of capitalism is neither an agora nor a shopping center under an open sky; rather it is a greenhouse, where all that is formerly outside has been pulled inside.”¹⁵ The Ibn Battuta Mall serves as a perfect, perhaps too literal, instance of such greenhouse production, for which not only climate but also geography and history have been manufactured.

Yet this greenhouse cannot help but provide clues regarding the context in which it is embedded. Recurring sales campaigns indicate that this once promising part of Dubai has been unable to fully withstand the economic recession or the newer malls that have mushroomed in other, now more favorable parts of the city. The Ibn Battuta Mall phase 2 expansion plan, which would have doubled the mall’s size with additional themed areas based on Hejaz, Morocco, Turkey, and Yemen, has been delayed or perhaps canceled, like many other construction projects in the city today. And so as much as the building may claim an independent and indifferent interior, insulating its visitors from the possible inconveniences of the surrounding area by producing its own climate, history, and geography, the outside seeps in incessantly, proving that the mall may only serve as one of the many artificially produced islands that make up Dubai. Despite a range of technological experimentations with scales, sizes, and configurations, these islands cannot escape a particular capitalistic monotony and remain far from radical or exciting.

14. In referring specifically to the conditions of workers in Dubai, Mike Davis writes: “In addition to being superexploited, Dubai’s helots—like the proletariat in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*—are also expected to be generally invisible. The local press . . . is restrained from reporting on migrant workers, exploitative working conditions, and prostitution. Likewise, ‘Asian laborers are banned from the glitzy shopping malls, new golf courses, and smart restaurants.’ Nor are the bleak work camps on the city’s outskirts—where laborers are crowded six, eight, or even twelve to a room, often without air-conditioning or functioning toilets—part of the official tourist image of a city of luxury, without poverty or slums.” Mike Davis, “Sand, Fear, and Money in Dubai,” in *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism*, ed. Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk (New York: New Press, 2007), 65. See also David Keane and Nicholas McGeehan, “Enforcing Migrant Workers’ Rights in the United Arab Emirates,” *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 15 (2008): 81–115; and Sulayman Khalaf and Saad al-Kobaisi, “Migrants’ Strategies of Coping and Patterns of Accommodation in the Oil-Rich Gulf Societies: Evidence from the UAE,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 26 (1999): 271–98.

15. Sloterdijk, *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals*, 26; Sloterdijk, *Kapitalist dünyanın iç-evreninde*, 28 (my translation).

