

Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood, an alternative creative hub?

The arts and culture scene in Dubai has seen a significant growth in the past ten years. Despite the lack of art institutions and museums, the city has made its mark on the global cultural calendar with events like the Dubai International Film Festival, Art Dubai and Emirates Airline Festival of Literature.

When it comes to contemporary art galleries, most of them can be found in DIFC Gate Village (in Dubai International Financial Centre) and in Al Quoz, the industrial part of Dubai town, which has seen an influx of galleries and cafes, particularly in Alserkal Avenue (a warehouse complex that is currently undergoing an expansion plan).

Although there is an abundance of art galleries in Dubai, I've always felt the art scene needs to be spread beyond the borders of DIFC and Al Quoz, to be more accessible to a wider range of Dubai's population. One venue that could be suitable for this is Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood.

An area that dates back to 1859, formerly known as Bastakiya, Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood is located in Bur Dubai and famous for its cluster of windtower houses and a scenic view of the creek and Deira's skyline on the opposite side. It is a popular tourist spot where visitors by the busloads are dropped off to see "historic" Dubai as this area is designated in the guidebooks and admire its exteriors.

There are a handful of museums, galleries and cafes within Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood, most notably Majlis Gallery which has been around since 1989 and XVA Gallery and Hotel which was established in 2003.

Al Fahidi lacks the vibe of an actual neighbourhood and has the potential to be a breathing and living space all year if more of the houses are opened up. Just like DUMBO in New York or Hajji Lane in Singapore – both historic and trendy areas that attracts visitors and locals alike, Al Fahidi can be a hybrid of the two.

Dubai has always had a "if you build it they will come" approach. If Al Fahidi can be allowed to reinvent itself to cater to contemporary tastes and still hold on to its historical heritage, it would be a much more popular spot and not just with the tourists.

There are plenty of empty houses in Al Fahidi that are begging to be opened up which can house artists, as studio spaces, or all year artist residencies. Cultural programmers can be invited to inject some cultural diversity - hosting events such as film screenings, book readings, and performances by local theatre communities, poets, musicians and stand up comedians - catering to all languages.

Dubai lacks independent shops, boutiques, cafes and restaurants. Al Fahidi could be the perfect spot for an alternative shopping and eating destination, away from the big malls and franchises – a much-needed option in Dubai.

Since 2007, Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood has hosted an annual art event every March to support and showcase UAE based artists. What started off as Creek Contemporary Art Fair, a satellite fair to coincide with Art Dubai has evolved into SIKKA Art Fair that was established in 2011. Founded by the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority, SIKKA aims to support and showcase visual and performing arts by UAE based artists

Why limit this to one month? There's an opportunity to promote culture all year, to engage with the locals and tourists – to help them view and experience Al Fahidi beyond its designated context, which is relegated to the past.

Historical areas needn't be confined to the past, to be looked at and admired from a distance. They can be living and breathing spaces and Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood be can be that.