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The Demise of Modernist Buildings in Khor Dubai: A Case Study on the FNCB Building

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Abstract

Khor Dubai, or Dubai Creek, is the historic district that went through the first layer of development before the urban expansion to the desert. It witnessed profound architectural transformations in three economic phases: the pearl trade, oil discovery, and real estate. Today, early modernist buildings have been replaced with high-rise buildings to meet the financial demands of real estate. This replacement has been a rapid process, making it difficult for the Modern Heritage Initiative of Dubai (MHID) to cease it. In the creek, the First National City Bank building (FNCB) is one of the buildings that marked modernity yet failed the test of time. This study aims to illustrate the economy's impact on Dubai's modern heritage, focusing on the FNCB. It also identifies the issues that hinder preserving the architectural heritage of smaller buildings. A descriptive research methodology is employed for this study using visual analysis, site visits, and conversations to illustrate the rise and fall of modernist structures. The findings establish that due to Dubai's fast-paced growth, replacing heritage is more profitable to sustain the ever-growing demands of Dubai as a real estate hub. It also discusses the importance of immaterial and material values historic buildings hold despite how insignificant they seem now.

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Keywords

Khor Dubai; First National City Bank building; Modernist Buildings; Modern Heritage Initiative of Dubai

1. Introduction

Khor Dubai, being the predecessor of the economy, carries layers of periodic events that are preserved through its architecture. It specifically went through a swift cultural and socio-economic change that defined the skyline of the creek, but it placed architectural heritage in continuous danger of neglect and demolition (Bandarin & Van Oers, 2012). These urban transformations were affected by the pearl trade, oil, and real estate, beginning with the uncontrollable removal of traditional heritage and continuing with modern heritage.

Pre-oil Dubai was a small trade coast that witnessed an increase in traditional settlements from the pearl trade. Once oil was discovered in 1966, the introduction of concrete buildings replaced the existing settlements (Damluji, 2006). At the same time, a stronger interest was taken in UAE internationally for its oil field. Today, this phenomenon repeats as high-rise towers replace early modernist buildings to meet the hegemony of corporate sectors. Following that, the UAE launched a campaign for the protection of heritage and modern heritage in 2011, the Modern Heritage Preservation Initiative. Although that was well established, surveys and recordings of lost Dubai heritage and their locations have not been accessible. This analysis traces the rise and fall of modernist buildings by creating a visual

reference. It also uses an open archive of one of the buildings to urge for the preservation and reuse of the remaining modernist structure that would revive the lost urban character in Dubai Creek.

2. Materials and Methods

The rationale of this study is to investigate heritage demolition by looking at Khor Dubai and focusing on the case of the First National City Bank building (FNCB). The methods used to study the pattern of heritage demolition include literature reviews, collecting photographs of Khor Dubai, site visits, and pilot interviews with a vital member of the MHID, Dr. Ahmad Mahmoud, the Director of the Architectural Heritage Department as well as Al Wasl Properties, the owners of the preserved heritage building the FNCB. Other than that, this study analyzes the preservation challenges of the area by drawing a visual diagram that traces the location of lost and remaining heritage. The visual diagram is a map of Old Dubai that highlights the names of lost and remaining heritage as well as the approximate demolition date of these buildings. For that, photographic data was collected from residents, newspapers, articles, and archives. One of the vital visual references used is Len Chapman's website, called "Dubai as it used to be", which archived the images she captured of Old Dubai.

3. Results

The following body of work discusses the most vital economic phases that affected Dubai's urban character in detail, tracing the demolition of heritage in each stage through the methods discussed earlier. The phases begin with the pearl trade, oil discovery, and finally the real estate demand. The research methods record Khor Dubai's buildings to find data that would remain invisible if not documented. Such data includes finding the function and program of lost and remaining modernist buildings, and estimating the year they were built and demolished. This also reveals the lack of accessible archival data and surveys on Dubai. Finally, the research uses the FNCB as a case study that provides an example of the struggle modernist heritage witnesses in the real estate demands of Dubai. The documentation presented in this paper highlights the preservation of intangible heritage through tangible heritage.

3.1. Pearl Trade

In the 1800s, Britain's affairs with Dubai increased to secure the trade route connected to India as well as the wealth of its pearl trade sector, leading to a maritime truce (Zahlan, 1978). Dubai, in the early 1900s, was recognized as a small trading center located only in the Arabian Gulf (Elshehtawy, 2004). Pearling encouraged people from around the region to settle there in pursuit of securing their wealth in the cash economy, and the influx of people led to the expansion of coastal settlements (Damluji, 2006). Between 1900-1950, Dubai was dependent on marine trade but went through minimal urban growth because of economic constraints as seen in Figure 1. The pearling industry declined from the invention of cultivated pearls in Japan, and the effects of WWII led to impoverishment (Damluji, 2006). At the time, settlements included temporary palm-frond shelters or permanent mud and coral wind-tower houses. By engaging in more than one form of trade, permanent dwellings began to grow as Dubai's trade flourished, adapting to the social and climate needs of the rising population (Zahlan, 1978).

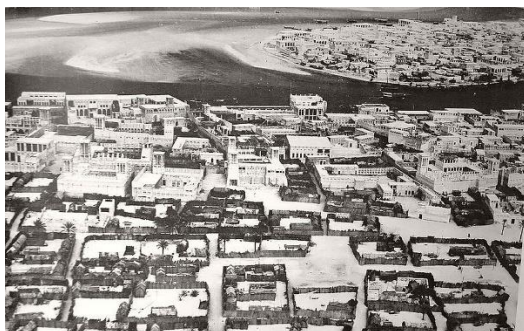


Figure 1: Dubai in the 1950s (Monovisions, n.d)



Figure 2: Dubai Creek in the 2000s (Jacobs, 2018).

3.2. Oil Discovery and International Exposure

The second phase emphasized early infrastructural developments in the Creek in relation to the active monopoly of British entities on the Gulf's oil-related financial affairs. This stage played a vital role in "establishing a modern nation-state" (National Pavilion, 2024, 1:51) promoting the creation of British and American bank institutions (Reisz, 2020). Other than that, British political entities assisted in the dredging project of the Creek and the initial establishment of the Baladiya, or Municipality. As a result, many of the architects commissioned to design some of the early modernist buildings were of international connections such as Tony Irving, Gordon Jones, and John R. Harris, drawn by clean canvas fields and the new oil wealth of the Gulf. Architects from neighboring countries as well as Western connections would travel to take part in the modernization of the UAE.

In the 1960s, concrete was initially imported from Japan, and the living conditions began to transform as it was no longer dependent on scarce local materials. A modest appearance of public concrete buildings took place by the creek, most of which were initially banks, offices, hotels, and oil company services for the international clientele and their families (Damluji, 2006). Likewise, His Highness Sheikh Rashid Bin Maktoum encouraged the establishment of international bank and hotel buildings to "further attract trade and diversify financial possibilities" (Ramos, 2009). During that period, the momentum of expansion gradually consumed the coastal settlements. The local population adapted to the new material, moved out of their settlements and replaced them with concrete business centers (Damluji, 2006). Modernist buildings were increasing in number while wind towers were disappearing.

By the 1970s, most of the existing dwellings had been replaced by modernist buildings. Concerns were raised over the uncontrollable rapid growth and inability of 'old' and 'new' to coexist in the creek, and the master plan was reviewed by John Harris to preserve the remaining pre-oil sites and to control building regulations in the area (Hadjiri & Boussa, 2007, p.18). Kevin Mitchell, a professor at the American University of Sharjah, claimed that the accelerated construction sold the past to marketable photographs in exchange for futuristic investments (2008, pp.49-50). It was only after most of the wind tower sites disappeared that the residents began to recollect its cultural heritage. Consequently, the municipality established the Architecture Heritage and Antiquities Department in 1991 to protect the remaining pre-oil settlements and later reconstruct lost heritage sites (Dubai Municipality, n.d).

3.3. Real Estate

By the 21st century, Dubai has been constructing towers to constantly refine its representation and removing smaller buildings that are of no use to the corporate economy as shown in Figure 2. It appeared to be a never-ending process at play, and it has been controlled privately by real estate parties concerned with profitable and branding hegemony, overlooking the contextual significance these sites might hold. The luxury of demolishing and rebuilding owes to the fact that 45% of the urban area is controlled by private real estate (Alawadi et al., 2018) and that a law hindering the demolition of modern heritage has not been established yet (Mahmoud, 2021). In a conversation with Ahmad Mahmoud, the Director of the Architectural Heritage Department, he further stated that, interestingly, the economic recession in 2008 helped modern heritage advocates prevent several demolishments since resources were reduced. The accelerated pattern that then resumed led to the formation of the Modern Heritage Initiative in 2018. The initiative preserved multiple modernist buildings, starting with the iconic ones. However, Ahmad Mahmoud stated that the initiative faced difficulties in protecting smaller modernist buildings because of private ownership. Therefore, many were not saved because of the fast-paced renewal pattern and the slow process of establishing laws to prevent demolition, but the initiative might still be a trend, but it formed an initial listing system that would keep updating as a starting point for introducing laws.

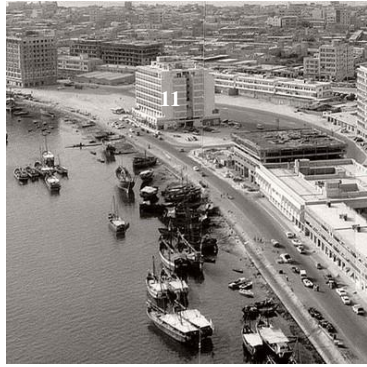


Figure 3 (left): Deiraside in the 1960s, showing the old Carlton Hotel (Albawaba, n.d).

Figure 4 (right): Deiraside in 1979, showing the old Carlton Hotel and the construction of new high-rise towers (Jacobs, 2018).

This renewal trend is a problem embedded in young cities that emerged to facilitate their wealth from oil revenues without having a strong pre-industrial and historic base (Damluji, 2006, p.23). It is a competition between monuments, measured by height and consumer culture. Damluji further stated that despite having available land, lower buildings were constantly being replaced with higher and newer ones. Other than that, UAE’s wealth, obtained from phenomenal oil reserves, caused an attitude that devalues the permanency of buildings (2006, pp.123). The resources to demolish and rebuild are sufficient that buildings are no longer perceived as permanent spaces. Khaled Alawadi argued that Dubai’s infrastructural development is a form of urban violence “that failed to consider the existing settlements and fabric” (Alawadi, 2014, p.352). Evident examples are the buildings surrounding Al Sabkha Station on the Deira side of Khor Dubai, as seen in Figures 3 and 4. The buildings were heavily replaced by towers. The Carlton Hotel, for instance, was altered multiple times until it was rebuilt nearby.

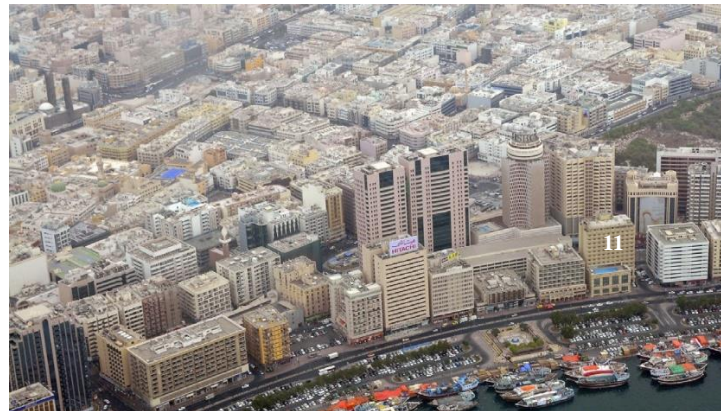


Figure 5: Deiraside in 2011, showing the new Carlton Tower Hotel (no. 11) and high-rise buildings (Huber, 2011).

While demolishing modernist buildings, Dubai has been rigorously reconstructing simulacrum of its lost heritage as educational and cultural tools to counter the impact developments had on tradition and to reconnect its people with their history (Bold et al., 2017, pp.3-5). One of the recent simulacrum is Al-Shindagha Museum, which is a reconstructed site near Al Fahidi historical district. In fact, Ahmad Mahmoud commented that Al-Shindagha settlement was reconstructed as a cultural museum that sentimentalizes the creek’s lost pre-oil tradition while idealizing its rapid expansion, and it was the largest reconstructed heritage site in the UAE (2021).

3.4. Modernist Buildings in Khor Dubai

The following diagrams illustrate the urban change performed on Khor Dubai’s early concrete buildings. Figure 5 highlights some of the early modernist buildings around the two marine stations that were the focal passage points in the 1900s, and it was generated based on the collection of photographs and satellite images from the 1960s-2000s, locating lost modernist buildings, including but not limited to the images in Figure 6 and 7, to draft an initial counter map that was inaccessible and undocumented in open recordings. Central modernist buildings are few, so the removal of one building erased a substantial amount of Dubai’s history. Table 1 and Figure 9 highlight the demolished versus

the remaining modernist buildings in the Creek. Despite that, most of the architects were foreign to the economic and climatic conditions, and many exemplified a sophisticated level of consciousness in their projects (Mitchell, 2008).



Figure 6 (left): Deira Creek in 1994 by Al Sabkha Station. 16. Ninja Group Building. 15. Alkhor building (Parker, 2017).

Figure 7 (right): Bur Dubai in 1971 by Al Ghibaiba Station showing the Chartered Bank (Chapman, Dubai as it used to be).

Table 1: Table of modernist buildings labeling each building numerically in relation to Figures 8 and 9. The names of the buildings are found based on data collection through images, site visits, and satellite images. The year built and demolished is approximated from the data collected and should not be used as accurate information.

Year	Label	Building Name	Year Built	Estimated Demolition Year
1960 – 1970	1	Riviera Hotel Bani Yas	1962	
	2	Unknown building		Unknown
	3	BBME Building	1960s	Unknown
	4	Ali Bin Abi Talib Mosque	1960s	
	5	The Chartered Bank	Late 1960s	Unknown
	6	First National City Bank	1967	
	7	Ambassador Hotel	1968	
	8	Plaza Cinema	1972	2017
	9	Old Petrol Station	Unknown	2020
	10	Postal Office	1960s	Unknown
1970- 1980	11	New Carlton Hotel	1978	Unknown
	12	Emirates Islamic Bank	Mid 1970s	
	13	Unknown	1970s	1980
	14	National Bank of Dubai	1971	1990s
	15	Alkhor Building	1970s	
	16	Ninja Group Building	1970s	
	17	Unknown Building	1960s	
	18	Bank of Baroda	1974-78	
	19	Astoria Hotel	1978	
1990- 2000	20	Deira + Bani Yas Towers	1980s	
	21	Dewan of the Emir	1984	
	22	Al Ras Souq	1980s	
Not known	23	Unknown Building	Unknown	2014
	24	Unknown Building	Unknown	2010
	25	Unknown Building	Unknown	2017
	26	Unknown Building	Unknown	2012

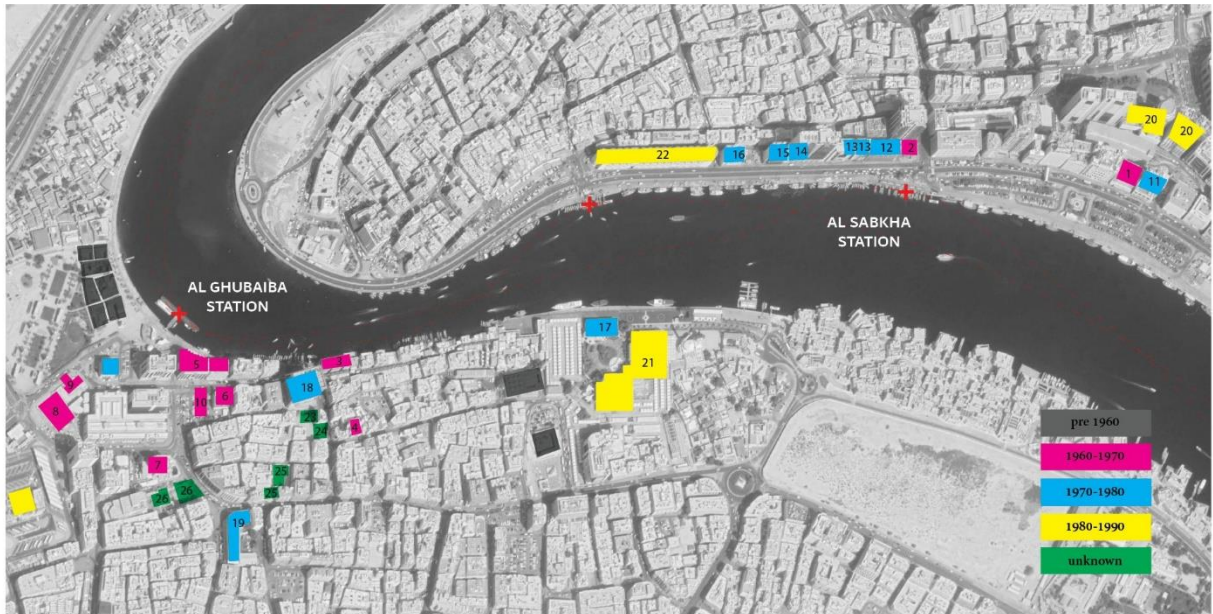


Figure 8: Map of several modernist buildings in Khor Dubai and the year they were estimated to have been built overlaid on a satellite image. Base Image captured from Google Maps.



Figure 9: Comparative Diagram of several Demolished and Remaining Modernist Buildings overlaid on a satellite image. Base Image captured from Google Maps.

Figures 8 and 9 were generated through the collection of photographs and the date they were taken. These modernist buildings demonstrate a sustainable response to the hot climate in contrast to contemporary curtain walls that exhaust the use of air conditioning. The buildings surrounding Al-Sabkha Station were heavily replaced by towers. The Carlton Hotel, for instance, was altered multiple times until it was rebuilt nearby to increase height and rooms as seen in Figures 3 and 5. The structures that did not fail the test of time were mostly towers or monolithic ones, but many were demolished in that area, including the National Bank of Dubai designed by John R. Harris, as seen in Figure 11. The buildings illustrate a strategy that is contextually aware of the climate, proportion, and scale of the surroundings (Mitchell, 2008) while implementing imported design features.



Figure 10: Plaza Cinema (Google Maps, 2016)



Figure 11: National Bank of Dubai in 1971 (Chapman, n.d)

Al Ghubaiba Station also witnessed recent activity in demolition and replacement. One main example is the first and last stand-alone cinema in Dubai, Plaza Cinema which was demolished in 2017, as seen in Figure 10 and building number 9 in Table 1. Ahmad Mahmoud stated that the previous director of Dubai Municipality discussed the possibility of preserving the cinema with the owner of the building, but the owner needed the land to be used more efficiently with another building. Other structures, as seen in Table 1, that also disappeared include the BBME building, the Chartered Bank, and the Dubai Postal Office. Amongst these, some scattered buildings survived, such as the Ambassador Hotel and FNCB. Today, the FNCB is considered an ordinary building except that it holds a historical significance to Khor Dubai’s urban character.

3.5. First National City Bank of Dubai

The US-based FNCB in Dubai commissioned Tony Irving and Gordon Jones to design a bank building in 1964, two years before the discovery of oil, and was built in 1967 (Ragette, 1972) as seen in Figures 12 and 13. The architects also designed the Crescent Petroleum building (1976-1994) in Sharjah, as well as the Gulf Bank of Kuwait in 1963 (AlQassemi, 2016). The FNCB was the third international bank established in the creek, alongside BBME and NBD. It then continued as a branch for bank companies until 2019. By 2020, it was evacuated.

Being one of the early banks, the building appeared in a British advertisement in Dubai. The film, by John Huntley, promoted the wealth of Dubai’s oil fields and its harbor. It previewed the more modern buildings built by the 1970s, concentrating on the FNCB several times (Huntley, 1970s, 0:15-0:25). In 1972, it was also mentioned in ARAMCO World magazine as one of the distinctive buildings that blended modern with traditional in new Gulf cities (Ragette, 1972). Friedrich Ragette provided a brief description of the building:

“The bank, completed in 1967, reflects the vertical columns, divided bays, and strong entablatures of the traditional wind towers of Dubai which still rise above many of the old houses around the site. The building is of concrete (some precast), with exposed surfaces left unplastered. Patterned screens on all elevations provide sun shading, as well as acting as security barriers. The angled arms at the top hold gold-anodized aluminum cylinders, which contain floodlights for security and decorative lighting” ... “Because groundwater was found very near the surface, the building is raised on a platform to strengthen the foundations. The platform also provides space for planting”.



Figures 12 & 13: FNCB Bank in the 1970s (Aramco World Magazine Archive)

Although this building did not compete with the architectural complexity of international buildings, Ragette praised the dynamic approach of producing a transformative element in relation to Dubai's limited material resources and economic constraints. Hence, his description indicates the importance of the building at the time as it was a tangible record of the commencement of newly imported materials and structural advancement. In addition, Damluji stated that concrete also offered opportunities to introduce higher structures evident in the FNCB, and it led to the on-site production of cement breezeblocks that were used abundantly in the early modernist buildings (Damluji, 2006, p.15). The patterned breezeblocks of the building illustrate the urban character of Deira in the 20th century and exhibit it in the ever-changing city.



Figure 14 & 15: FNCB Breeze-blocks in 2020 (Courtesy of author).

The claustra were not celebrated as a mashrabiya since windows were minimized to insulate Dubai's unkind climate. Instead, the breezeblocks and the high columns were iconic elements that exemplified wealth to neighboring settlements. Since the bank served international companies and not the local population, the spaces did not carry any value to residents, but the façade's features affected the periphery of the creek.

Specifically, the fish market took place right in front of the building by the water as residents automatically used the landmark as a market gathering point, as seen in Figure 16. Yet, the importance given to the façade questions its location today. Ragette (1972) described that it was originally designated "for the picturesque waterfront of old Dubai, The Creek" as an icon. The later construction of the road and taller buildings that suited the newer representations of modernity in the waterfront hid the building. The fragmented and disconnected nature of the buildings around and including the FNCB is one of the consequences of Dubai's renewal phenomenon, as seen in Figure 17.



Figure 16 (left): Fish Market held in front of FNCB (Courtesy of Aramco World Magazine Archive).



Figure 17 (right): The FNCB building in 2020 (Courtesy of the author, 2020).

Upon briefly entering the building in December 2020, details of the interior that were described by Ragette (1972) were nowhere to be found. He described the interior of the bank in detail, stating that it was “finished in bright colors and the public lobby features a mural formed from perforated, decorative white cement panels similar to those used as ventilation openings in traditional Dubai houses”. Instead, a window made of glass blocks found in the lobby might have replaced the mural. The plan and interior photos are not shared in this paper for confidentiality requested by the owner.

Other evident alterations included the addition of an ATM room made up of aluminum cladding, a ramp, an extended lobby, a private parking space, and an elevator that emulates a massive minaret on the exterior as shown in Figures 18 and 19. These additions might have improved the building’s function, but they symbolize the building’s demise in the face of large and smart companies. The size of the vaults and offices cannot adapt to today’s corporate needs. Nevertheless, the building’s structure, age, façade, and material manifested the transition between traditional and contemporary in a location that celebrated Dubai’s first layer of development. It desperately tried to satisfy the real estate when adaptive reuse would ensure the communal reconnection of the immaterial values it carried with a program that would enliven the plan of the building.



Figure 18 (left): The elevator shaft addition that is visible from the outside (Courtesy of the author, 2020).



Figure 19 (right): The FNCB ATM addition (Courtesy of the author, 2020).

Despite the recent interest in preserving modernist buildings, this building has yet to grab the attention of the open archive on modernist buildings, unlike John Harris’ First NBD Bank in 1971. Ironically, the interest in the NBD building increased as a landmark of modernity shortly after its demolition. The FNCB, however, was surprisingly preserved since it has been owned by the real estate firm, Wasl Properties, which shared the interest in preserving heritage (Wasl, nd).

The community, however, has been invested in preserving photographs of demolished and remaining heritage sites as a way of recording the history of the UAE. At the 2014 Venice Biennale, the National Pavilion of UAE titled this form of documentation as ‘Structures of Memory’ where buildings are found in photographs (National Pavilion, 2018). Although vital, the movement focused on documentation, and a movement is yet to focus on the potential of repurposing early modernist heritage in creative ways that maintain the architectural essence. These efforts are evident in iconic structures like the Dubai World Trade Centre, Dubai Municipality Building, and Dubai Hospital. The soaring buildings preserve a historic event in the form of a building and affect the skyline of the city. If the smaller modernist structures were to be repurposed as galleries and public centers, they could reconnect with the community and consequently revitalize the urban character that has been fragmented profoundly as stated by Mahmoud. Therefore, saving the historical layers of modern architecture would preserve the collective memory of the community that has been constantly erased bit by bit in Khor Dubai (National Pavilion, 2014).

4. Conclusion

Modernist structures, specifically in Dubai Creek, carried an important layer of historical events including oil discovery and the consequent formation of international financial relations. This period, although short, marked the beginning of Dubai’s wealth today. However, the creek’s architecture was repeatedly renewed to adapt to the commercial hegemony of corporate sectors. The Dubai Heritage Initiative managed to preserve these smaller buildings

but faced difficulties with the private ownership of these landmarks. In addition to that, communities have been raising awareness of the demise of modernist buildings, but most of them, similar to this paper, delved into collecting and idealizing photographs of lost memories since they accurately capture habits, activities, and cultures that were practiced in correlation to the landmark. An example of that is the residents' use of the FNCB as the façade of a fish market more than a bank since it was used by expats more than the local population. Thus, early modernist structures that are barely gaining the attention of the community preserve the urban character of Dubai, such as the FNCB. Since the building failed to adapt to today's bank corporations, activating it as a repurposed program would revive its spaces and subsequently revive the urban character of the historic district of Dubai.

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