



Everyday Urbanism Between Authenticity and Modernity: A Study to Revitalize Ras Al Khaimah's Traditional Markets

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Executive Summary

Traditional markets, or souqs, have long served as vital social centers in many cities, fostering community interaction, trade, and residence. In the context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and specifically Ras Al Khaimah (RAK), these traditional markets are of particular significance, deeply integrated into the RAK city's urban fabric and offering an opportunity to harmonize modernity with the emirate's authentic roots. This policy paper commences with a historical overview of RAK's traditional markets, tracing their evolution and significance. It then delves into the impact of urban morphology on these markets, exploring how the city's layout influences their dynamics. Based on a pilot study, an analysis of the markets' strengths and weaknesses follows, identifying areas of improvement and potential avenues for enhancement. Furthermore, the paper investigates the spatial extent of the markets, mapping their boundaries and identifying key features. Drawing upon these insights, the paper concludes with a series of preliminary recommendations for the redevelopment of the markets. These recommendations were further investigated during the formal fieldwork stage and will be included in a second policy statement to provide insights for policymakers in leveraging the historical and cultural richness of the souqs to drive the urban development of RAK, ensuring their preservation and revitalization for future generations.

Introduction

Traditional markets play an ongoing and integral role in shaping the urban landscape of Ras Al Khaimah (RAK) city. Beyond mere commercial hubs, these markets serve as vital spaces where traditional socio-economic practices and the historical essence of the locale are perpetually revitalized, demonstrating resilience to evolving dynamics. Our project seeks to shed light on the challenges encountered by various market users including vendors, workers, and visitors, while exploring the socio-spatial and physical adaptability inherent within these markets. By doing so, we aim to provide

policymakers and planners with well-informed insights to guide decision-making processes.

The main objectives of our project in RAK are threefold: first, to explore the evolving role of local markets; second, to compare the impacts of everyday urbanism on their success or failure; and third, to propose a revitalization strategy focusing on the needs of vendors, users, and decision-makers. Our aim is to highlight the historical and cultural significance of the markets in RAK city and to emphasize their potential as a catalyst for the city's development through a comprehensive urban regeneration initiative. Despite the prevalence of large indoor shopping malls and online retail platforms, these

traditional markets continue to thrive. Their resilience can be attributed to unique characteristics that set them apart, warranting further exploration to understand and leverage these qualities in revitalization efforts.

The transformation of any local market is intricately linked to the urban morphology of the city. Recognizing the significance of the spatial characteristics of local markets, everyday urbanism can serve as a valuable lens to comprehend the socio-spatial interrelationships within urban areas. It allows us to appreciate the wisdom of local communities in maintaining both formal and informal patterns that underscore their identity and enhance the livability of urban life through dynamic interactions within the market space.

The Geography and Urban Development of Ras Al Khaimah

Ras Al Khaimah (RAK), the fourth largest among the seven emirates comprising the UAE, spans an area of 1,684 square kilometers and is home to an estimated population of 0.4 million. Positioned strategically along the Arabian Gulf, RAK's geographical location is significant. Situated near the northernmost point of the UAE peninsula, it serves as the first settlement encountered upon entering the Arabian Gulf. This advantageous location, coupled with high accessibility, has transformed RAK into a compelling trade route, fostering rapid prosperity. The establishment of a thriving port in the region, centered around key economic assets such as the Creek and the Arabian Gulf, have further contributed to the city's development. This strategic infrastructure has facilitated the efficient movement of goods and services, further enhancing RAK's status as a hub for trade and commerce in the region.

Geographically, the northern part of the emirate of RAK is divided by the Creek into two primary areas: the historic Old Town in the west and the modern Al Nakheel area in the east. Each of these distinct sections encapsulates unique architectural characteristics reminiscent of other port cities in the Gulf region (Kirchner, 2018; Seif, 2013). These architectural elements comprise Fareej, which represents the traditional neighborhood

unit; Al-Hisn, or forts, historically served as defensive structures and symbols of power; the Sahil, typically the coastal or waterfront area; and the markets, the souqs, or traditional markets, serve as the heartbeat of the city's economy, facilitating the exchange of goods and ideas. The souqs serve as the primary marketplace for the exchange of goods and complements residential activities with the city. According to findings from the focus group with market visitors, four main, active traditional markets were recognized, each with their own unique identity: the Kuwaiti Souq, the Old RAK Souq, Al-Mairid Souq, and the Old Nakheel Market. These marketplaces are shown in Figure 1, highlighting their locations within the urban fabric of RAK.

Figure 1. Locations of the traditional markets in Ras Al Khaimah. Source: Images from RAK Center for Statistics Studies (CSS) and analyzed by the authors.



The Geography and Morphology of RAK Traditional Markets

The geography, morphology, and urban context of RAK's traditional markets are deeply interconnected, modeling the city's cultural and economic landscape. Their strategic positioning near waterways has profoundly impacted the layout and architecture of the markets, encouraging trade, and attracting merchants and visitors alike.

Old RAK Souq and the Kuwaiti Souq

Both the Kuwaiti Souq and Old RAK Souq present distinct urban characteristics.

Old RAK Souq embraces an organic urban fabric characterized by irregular, narrow lanes. Dominated by single-story buildings, this market is rich with originality and history and serves as a reminder of the ancestors' legacy of multiple occupations. The area is surrounded by vacant and unused land, contributing to its rustic charm and historic appeal.

In contrast, the Kuwaiti Souq, which was established in the 1970s and named after the Kuwaiti Hospital located in its vicinity, features a more organized layout. Shops are arranged linearly, interconnected along an east-west axis. Additionally, the market is connected to main roads through interconnected side streets, enhancing accessibility and traffic flow. Situated near the former RAK Corniche, both markets serve as vibrant commercial hubs, attracting locals and visitors alike with their unique atmospheres and offerings.

Both the Kuwaiti Souq and the Old RAK Souq hold immense significance due to their location within the Old Town District, a region of profound historical value. The proximity of the Old RAK Souq to the Old City of RAK further enhances its status, making it widely recognized as the most authentic and least manipulated site out of all the UAE's core historic settlements, and it contains the most preserved urban fabric (Damluji, 2006; Saif, 2013). This distinctiveness serves as a living testament to RAK's rich heritage. The strategic location of these markets within the Old Town District ensures excellent accessibility for customers, despite high traffic at

various times of the day and seasons of the year.

Residents of RAK frequently visit these markets, which also attract visitors from other emirates and tourists, especially those from neighboring Oman, as was noted by several merchants in the markets during the fieldwork. The popularity of both markets stems from the diverse array of unique shopping experiences they offer, contributing significantly to the cultural and commercial landscape of RAK.

Al-Mairid Souq and Old Nakheel Market

Al-Mairid Souq is distinguished by two prominent attractions that contribute to its fame. Firstly, it is home to the Al-Mairid Fish Market, renowned as the oldest fish market in the emirate – built in 1982 and deeply embedded in the cultural heritage of the residents. Secondly, the market boasts the Gold Souq, housing the highest concentration of jewelers in the area. Much like the previously mentioned two Souqs, Al-Mairid Souq attracts customers and tourists from across the emirate and beyond.

Situated in the Nakheel District, the Old Nakheel Market has served as a bustling hub since the late 1970s, attracting customers from various parts of the emirate and beyond, including residents and tourists. The market is famous for two primary attractions. Firstly, the Fruit and Vegetable Market, though now relocated to accommodate new building projects. Secondly, the Gulf Cinema, also known as Al-Nakheel Cinema, stands as the oldest movie theater in the emirate. Presently, the Gulf Cinema exclusively screens Indian movies, catering to predominantly Indian customers. Over the years, the market has undergone multiple transformations, indicative of the emirate's modernization. Today, it offers a diverse range of products, including fresh vegetables and fruits, electronics, textiles, and ready-made cloths. This evolution reflects the market's adaptability to changing demands while maintaining its significance as a multifaceted commercial and cultural center in RAK.

The Significance of the Markets

The significance of the four traditional markets in RAK becomes apparent through a comprehensive analysis of their strengths and weaknesses, as collected during

spatial observations, focus group sessions and several site visits.

Strengths of the Markets

Cultural and Social Values: The markets, much like RAK itself, are deeply appreciated by residents and business owners for their cultural, social, and economic significance. They are integral to everyday life, holding a nostalgic place in the collective memory of the community. As one of the markets shop merchants shared, “I am happy working in this market. I have been working here since 2009. Thirteen years I’ve been working in this store, this location, and now I am the manager.”

Preserved Urban Fabric: Situated in the old parts of the emirate, these markets feature preserved urban fabric and historical landmark buildings, underscoring their cultural significance. This preservation enhances the authentic charm of the markets.

Social Hubs: The markets serve as vibrant spatial hubs for social interactions, where people gather to socialize, connect with neighbors, stay informed about news, and discuss local issues. This social function fosters a sense of community and belonging.

Economic Value: The markets contribute significantly to the local economy catering to diverse demands of various customer groups. They offer a wide range of products, satisfying individual needs and preferences while supporting local businesses and livelihoods.

Bargaining Opportunities: Customers appreciate the flexibility of market pricing, which allow them to engage in bargaining. This characteristic distinguishes markets from fixed-price shops, or other online shopping platforms, providing an interactive and dynamic shopping experience that empowers customers to obtain quality products at favorable prices.

Weakness of the Markets

As Public Spaces: Concerns have been raised regarding the markets’ status as public spaces. Issues such as the condition of pedestrian walkways not only impact aesthetics, but also raise concerns about pedestrian safety.

Limited and Illegal Parking: Another significant concern is the limited and often illegal parking spaces

in and around the market areas, posing challenges for both visitors and businesses.

Vegetation: The markets suffer from a lack of vegetation, potentially diminishing the overall appeal of the spaces and affecting environmental quality. Provision of greenery, as suggested by several visitors and vendors in the markets, may enhance the markets’ ambience by reducing heat, noise and dust as well as improving micro-environments.

Deteriorated Building Facades: The state of building facades within the markets is noted as a weakness, potentially diminishing the visual attractiveness of these historical sites.

Addressing Concerns and Proposing Solutions

To effectively revitalize these markets, it is crucial to engage with the architectural and intrinsic values of the study sites. This involves understanding the needs and perspectives of various stakeholders, including shop owners, workers, and market visitors. The spectrum of users encompasses both local and expatriate RAK residents, residents from other emirates, and tourists.

The authors emphasize the necessity of a revitalization plan that extends beyond physical improvements. A successful plan must be rooted in a profound understanding, communication, and awareness of the cultural, social, and economic values embedded in these markets. Realizing the everyday patterns and lived experiences of market users are crucial for developing interventions that are not only visually appealing but also resonate with the community, encouraging increased visitation, and preserving the markets as vital components of RAK’s heritage.

Methodology and Results

The authors undertook a series of visits with the markets’ three categories of market users: (1) visitors (shoppers), (2) shop workers/retailers/vendors, and (3) decision-makers. The field work aimed to understand the spatial legibility of the market from the visitors/ shopper’s experience, the infrastructural needs from the retailer’s perspective and political will from decision

makers. Market visitors were engaged through a focus group to clarify geographical extent of the markets, and an online survey to assess the infrastructure of the markets. Face-to-face interviews were held with shop owners who responded to predetermined sets of questions. Similarly, a face-to-face interview was utilized to engage with decision-makers, specifically the RAK Municipality.

Face-to-Face Interviews

During face-to-face interviews, market visitors were tasked with defining the boundaries of the traditional markets from their perspective and identifying any recognizable landmarks. Figures 2–5 show firstly the actual geographic location of each market, followed by the participants' perceptions of the location and boundary of each market.

Figure 2. Kuwaiti Souq



Figure 3. Old RAK Souq

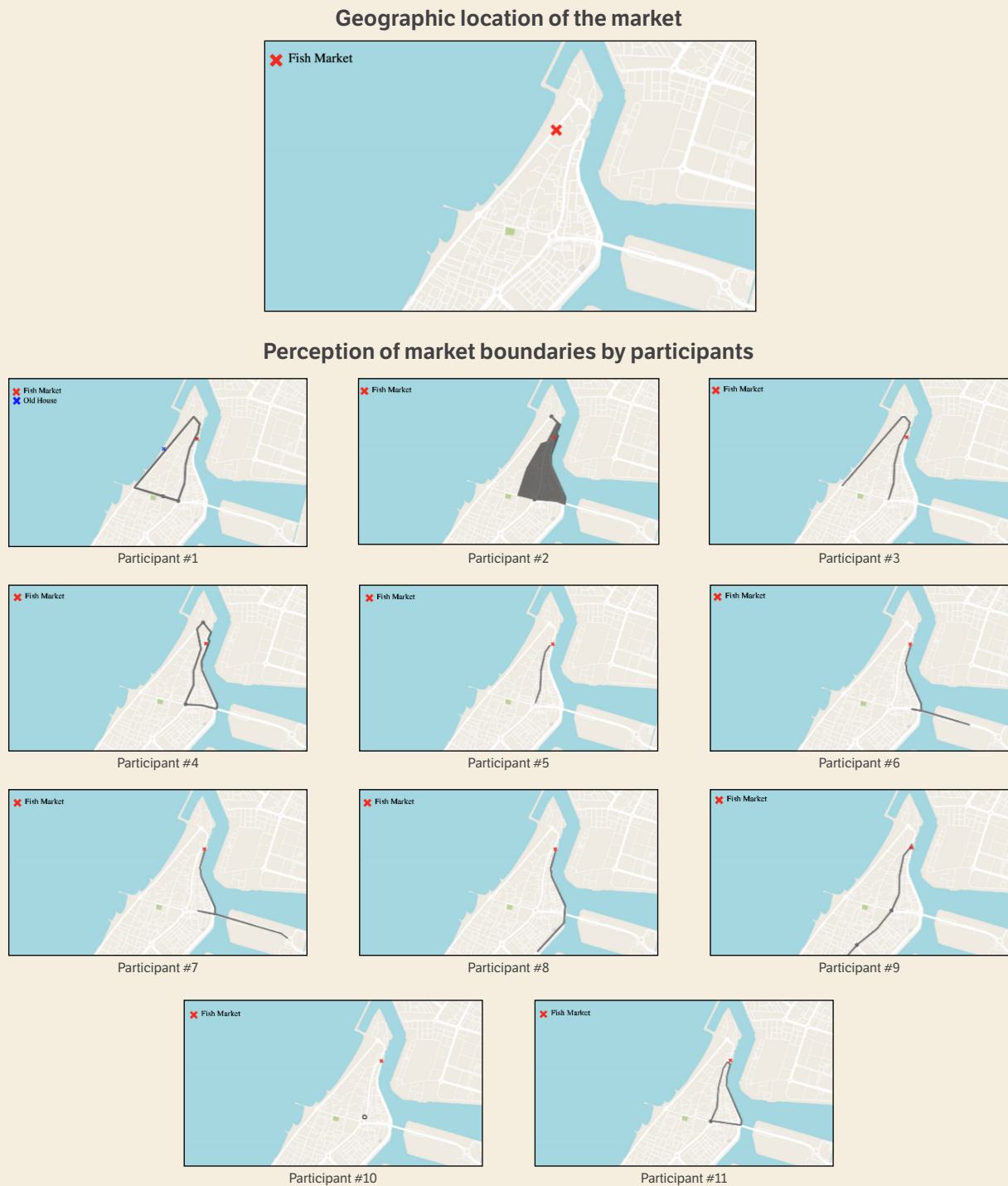


Figure 4. Al-Mairid Souq

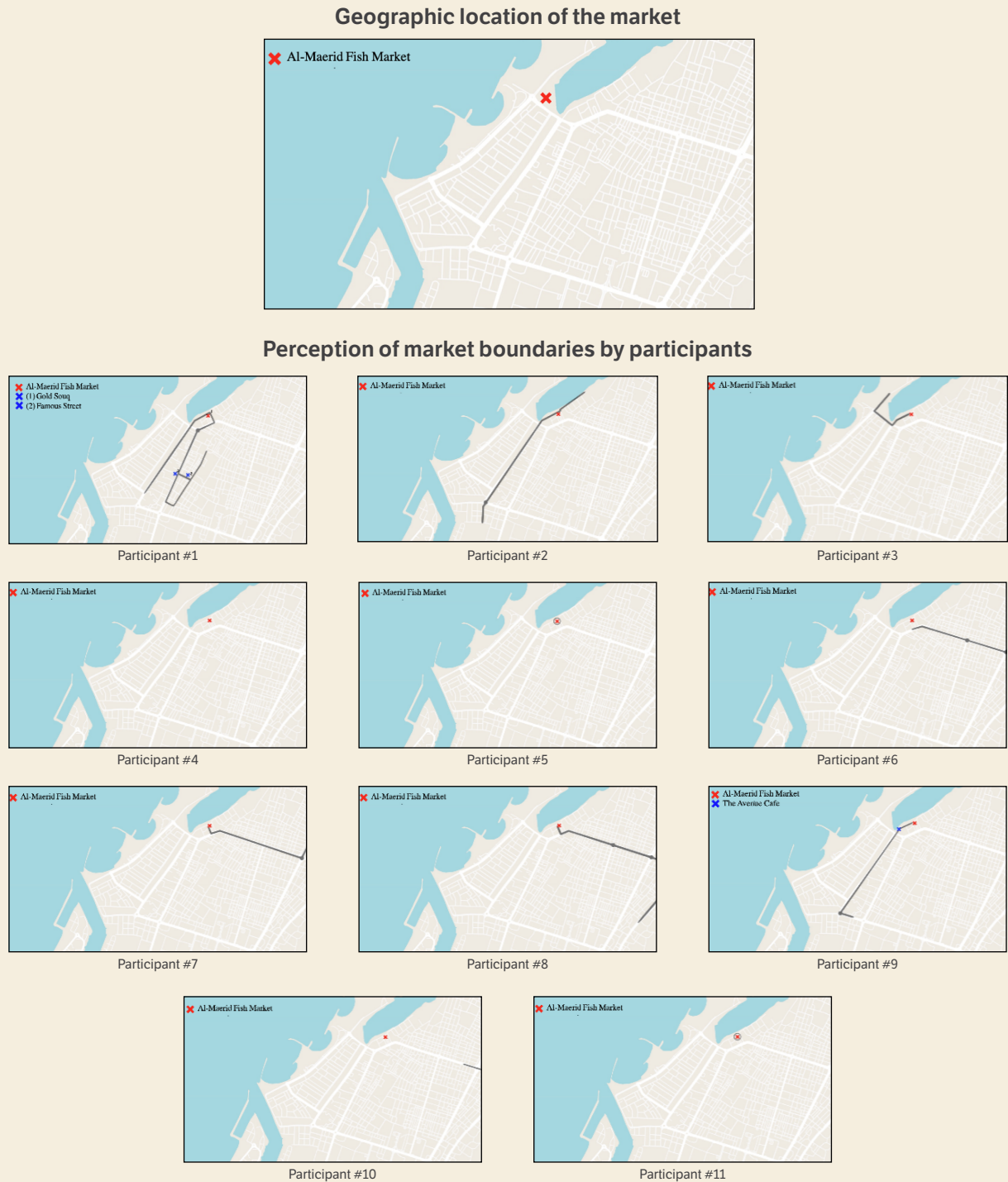


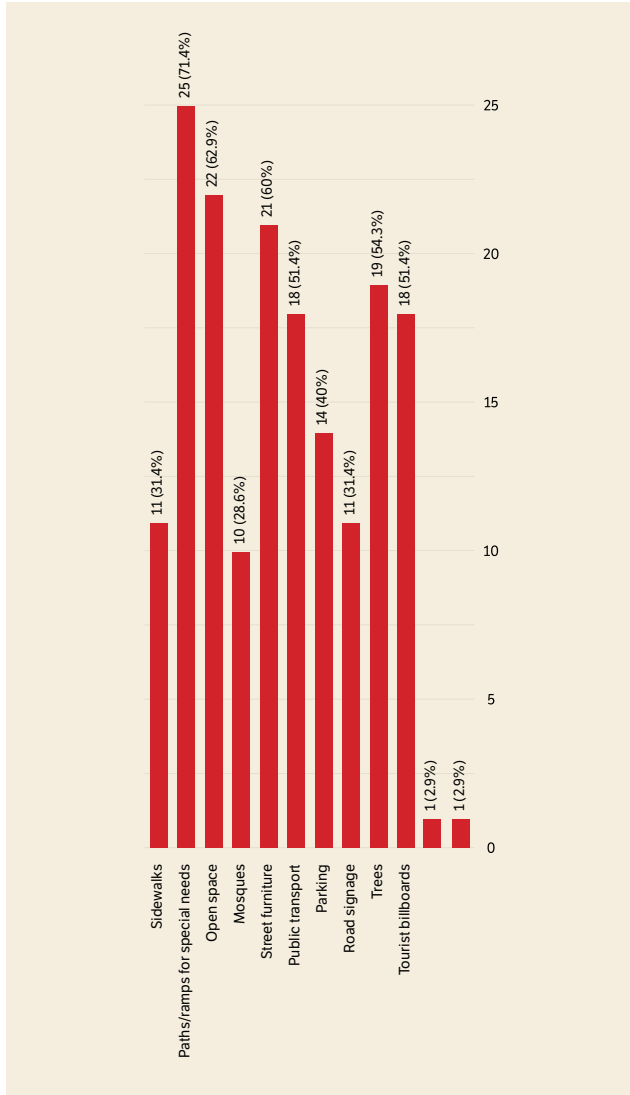
Figure 5. Old Nakheel Market



Online Survey with Market Visitors

The online survey included a total of 22 multiple choice and short answer questions. The participants responses to a question on the “infrastructure deficiencies within the markets,” are shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Participant responses regarding infrastructure deficiencies within the markets.



Face-to-Face Interviews with Market Workers (owners/vendors/retailors)

During the interviews conducted with RAK shop owners between May and June 2023, a range of insights were gleaned regarding the challenges they face in their day-to-day operations. One prominent issue highlighted was the significant impact of limited parking availability, particularly evident during peak shopping seasons and the holy month of Ramadan. Shop owners expressed frustration over the scarcity of parking spaces, which often led to congestion and

inconvenience for both shoppers and employees.

Moreover, the interviews shed light on the broader issue of inadequate walkability infrastructure within the market areas. Participants emphasized the lack of well-maintained sidewalks, street furniture, and shaded areas, making it difficult for pedestrians to navigate the streets comfortably, especially during the intense summer months in RAK. As a result, many individuals opt to rely on their vehicles for transportation, further exacerbating the parking challenges mentioned earlier.

One interesting observation that emerged from the interviews was the transformation of the shopping experience into what could be metaphorically described as a “drive-through” environment. With limited parking and poor walkability infrastructure, customers often choose to remain in their vehicles while workers bring their purchases directly to them. This adaptation reflects how shoppers address the challenges they encounter on a daily basis.

Overall, the interviews provided valuable insights into the specific challenges faced by RAK shop owners and underscored the importance of addressing issues related to parking, walkability infrastructure, and wayfinding to improve the overall shopping experience in the region.

In addition to highlighting the practical challenges faced by RAK shop owners, the interviews also touched upon the broader concept of the “sense of place” within the market areas. Despite the difficulties with parking, walkability infrastructure, and wayfinding many shop owners expressed a deep attachment to their local surroundings and a strong sense of belonging to the community.

Participants emphasized the unique character and atmosphere of RAK’s markets, shaped by the vibrant interactions between customers and vendors, as well as the rich cultural heritage of the region. Despite the hustle and bustle of daily operations, there was a palpable sense of pride among shop owners in being part of these dynamic market spaces.

Furthermore, several interviewees recalled fond memories and highlighted the importance of preserving and enhancing the sense of place within the market areas, recognizing it as a key factor in attracting customers and fostering a sense of community

cohesion. They expressed a desire to see investments in beautification efforts, such as the addition of greenery, street furniture, sidewalks, and public art installations, to create more inviting and enjoyable spaces for both residents and visitors alike.

In this way, the interviews not only shed light on the practical challenges faced by RAK shop owners but also underscored the intangible but essential elements that contribute to the overall sense of place and identity within the market areas.

Recommendations

Area 1: Urban Perspective

Defining the Geographical Extent of Traditional Markets: Despite efforts to establish clear market boundaries, except for the Old RAK Souq, the geographical extent of the markets remains ambiguous. One contributing factor to this ambiguity is the absence of a formalized and universally recognized delineation. Although information obtained from RAK Municipality suggests that market borders are well-defined by officials, this clarity has not been effectively implemented on the ground.

Incorporate Pedestrian-Friendly Principles and Diversity of Land Use: The layout and amenities of the markets, along with the surrounding urban infrastructure, play a crucial role in stimulating lively market visits and fostering engagement in various activities such as shopping, dining, and entertainment. However, a site visit revealed a deficiency in areas that could promote a more dynamic utilization of the spaces within these markets. To fully harness the potential of these spaces, it is imperative to efficiently leverage the entire area. This requires not only the development of necessary infrastructure but also the integration of appropriate urban design principles. Emphasizing the creation of pedestrian-friendly infrastructure is essential to enhancing the appeal and accessibility of the markets and its walkable environment (see Figures 7 and 8).

Additionally, promoting a diverse range of land uses within the market area will create a vibrant environment, enabling individuals to not only engage in shopping, but to also reside, work, interact, and fully embrace the

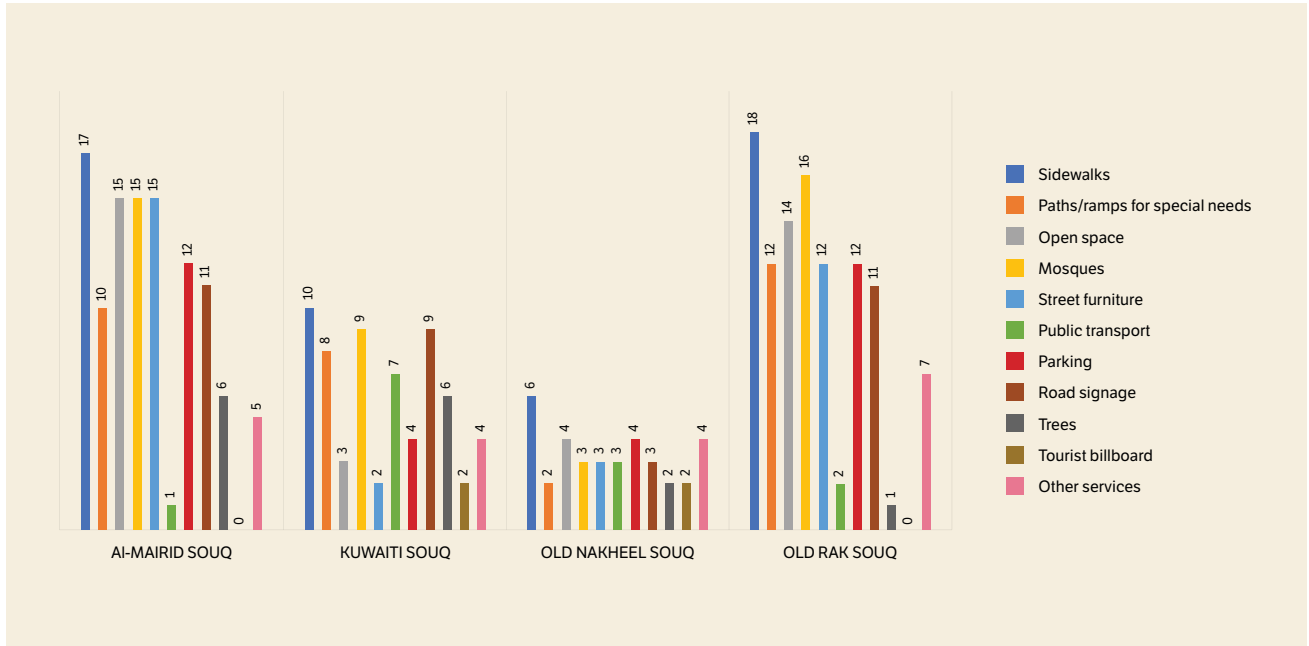
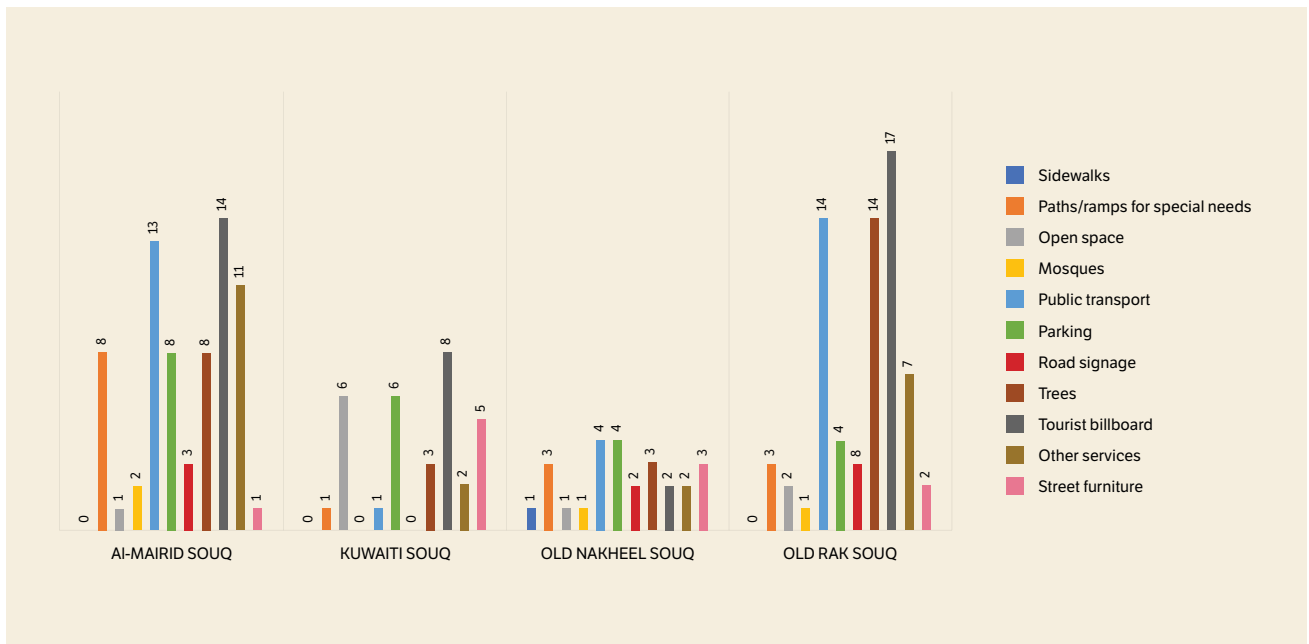
enriching experience that these traditional markets exhibit. Figures 9 and 10 show the survey outcomes regarding services and facilities that each market has or has not, as expressed by the market visitors.

Figure 7. Lack of pedestrian walkways



Figure 8. Lack of sidewalks



Figure 9. Available furniture, services, and signage.

Figure 10. Missing infrastructure and services.


Area 2: Community Engagement

Input from Urban Planners: RAK traditional markets present abundant opportunities for urban planners beyond catering to visitors. By strategically leveraging the consistent attraction and frequent visits to these markets, planners can create communal spaces where residents gather, communicate, and encourage memorable experiences. This approach would not only enrich community life but also generate additional revenues for business owners.

To realize this vision, it is essential to develop a comprehensive layout plan for the markets. This plan should meticulously encompass the distribution and grouping of stores, facilities, and services. The implementation of distinct entrances, clear signage, and detailed maps will enhance the navigability and overall experience within the market areas. Furthermore, translating the officially defined market boundaries onto the ground through clear signs and wayfinding maps would ensure that visitors and stakeholders have a precise understanding of the markets' limits and offerings.

Polymorphous Engagement for Precise Definition:

While an official geographical extent of the markets has been established and recommended for implementation on the ground, it is essential to evaluate whether these officially defined boundaries align with the perceptions of visitors, landowners, and business merchants. Evaluating the disparity between the public's understanding of the markets and their official definition is crucial for achieving a more precise and comprehensive delineation.

In this assessment, involving relevant stakeholders, including the Tourism and Development Authority and the Department of Economic Development, is imperative. These key entities should play an integral role in defining the market boundaries, ensuring a holistic and inclusive approach. Prior to finalizing the officially defined geographical extent on the ground, a structured program should be devised to actively engage these stakeholders in the boundary-setting process.

This proactive engagement will facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the diverse perspectives and encourage polymorphous engagement. By involving all relevant stakeholders, this approach ensures a collective effort in redeveloping the markets tailored to the specific context of RAK. This will enable a polymorphous and dynamic transformation that aligns with the unique characteristics of the region.

Conclusion

RAK's active traditional markets represent invaluable assets for both the emirate of RAK and the UAE, serving as vital social and economic hubs. Beyond mere spaces for purchasing goods, these markets play a crucial role in fostering traditional socio-economic practices and contributing to the spatial legacy of the region. The resulting urban fabric effectively bridges modernity with the authentic traditions of the emirate, thereby shaping the broader urban development of the city.

It is imperative for decision-makers to strategically leverage these markets to enhance the social and economic well-being of the emirate. This requires thoughtful redevelopment measures and proactive steps. The initial but crucial step involves precisely

delineating the boundaries of each market, providing clarity and directions for future development efforts. Subsequently, integrating urban design elements into these well-defined markets and providing necessary infrastructure support should be prioritized. This comprehensive approach will not only enhance the markets themselves but also set the stage for revitalizing other urban areas in RAK.

By capitalizing on the potential of traditional markets and implementing comprehensive redevelopment strategies, RAK can further solidify its position as a vibrant and culturally rich destination, contributing to the overall prosperity and sustainability of the emirate and the broader UAE.

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