A blog project about everyday living in the city

Emma Rawlings Smith, Head of Geography, British School – Al Khubairat, Abu Dhabi and Sin Yee Koh, a postgraduate student from the LSE
2008 was the year of the urban transition - when for the first time in history more than half the people in the world lived in urban rather than rural environments.

A Season of Urban Vignettes is a collaborative blog capturing the different ways people experience, negotiate and engage with city life as the world undergoes the largest wave of urban growth in history.

Vignette means ‘small illustration’ and refers to the short length of the blogs.

Sin Yee Koh explains how Urban Vignettes came to be created and Emma Rawlings Smith, a contributor and secondary teacher, will explain how the project can be used in the classroom to aid the teaching of ‘place’.

This will help anyone interested in urban living and people planning their own blog project.
The Idea

- Collaborative
  - Sharing and networking on a common platform
  - Pooling of knowledge
- Visual-based blog
  - A picture says a thousand words
- The different ways people experience, negotiate and engage with city life
  - Personal perspectives
  - Everyday experiences
The Idea

Choice of own themes

Respond to weekly themes
Nut & Bolts: Internal Recruitment & Funding

• Recruiting team members
  – LSE postgraduate students in urban-related degrees
  – Positive response from people with diverse interests, skills and professional experiences
    • Journalists/writers, photographers, architects, designers …

• Pitching for funding
  – urban@lse student-led initiative

• Teamwork
  – Brainstorming ideas
  – Setting timelines and deliverables
  – Roles and responsibilities
## Urban Vignette project

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Nut & Bolts:
Shopping for Wordpress Themes
6. Publicity and privacy

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Nut & Bolts: External Recruitment

- Call for contributors

**CAPTURE YOUR CITY**

What is unique about your city? What do you love and hate about it? Which sights, sounds, smells and feelings make you call this home? Where are your favourite places, the hidden paradises? How do you negotiate the daily grind? What is changing? What stays the same?

- Inviting potential collaborators
Nut & Bolts: Social Media
First Season: Weekly Themes

1. Mobility
2. Festivity
3. Family
4. Psst...!
5. Sounds
6. Hope
7. Signs
8. Diversity
9. Youth
10. Renewal
11. Water
12. Food
First Season: Own Themes

1. Brussels: Works in Progress in the EU Capital
2. Cities and Folk/Traditional Culture
3. Existing Between Extremes (Stories of an Average Londoner)
4. Fort-de-France, Martinique, A Changing and Dynamic City
5. Land Developments in the Urban Environment
6. Life in a Desert City
7. Life in a Modern, but Medieval Town
8. Love Your City
9. Our City, Our Civilization
10. Street Art
11. The Everyday Histories of Unseen Modernities
12. Urban Parks and Green Spaces
13. Whose City is it by the Way?
Our Contributors: Geographies
The Scorecard: Visitors

5,861 people visited this site

- Visits: 10,178
- Unique Visitors: 5,861
- Pageviews: 27,547
- Pages / Visit: 2.71
- Avg. Visit Duration: 00:03:45
- Bounce Rate: 55.39%

- 57.61% New Visitor
- 42.39% Returning Visitor
The Scorecard: Geographies

- 129 countries
The Scorecard: Geographies

- **1,488 cities**

End of Season: Feedback

• Contributors enjoyed the project:
  – Stimulated their own work
  – Opportunity to network with others

• Suggestions:
  – More interactions/collaborations between contributors
  – Collate contributions into a physical publication (e.g. book, calendar, exhibit)
  – Frequency of submissions: Weekly to bi-weekly
  – More critical thought, discussion and analysis but also remain creative, light and engaging to a wide audience who want to learn about cities informally and personally
Learning Points: Looking Back, Projecting Forward

• Project
  – Potential beyond that originally envisioned
  – Thinking about next steps

• Difficulties of continuity
  – Team members moving on
  – Temporary nature of postgraduate student life

• Personal gains
  – Skills: Setting-up and maintaining website
  – Creative thinking: How to inform teaching and learning about geography
2013 will see a new season of Urban Vignettes in the Autumn
WHY COLLABORATE? WHAT IS ABU DHABI LIKE? HOW CAN STUDENTS DEVELOPED A ‘SENSE OF PLACE’?
This tweet stimulated my sense of curiosity
My first Urban Vignettes blog – inspired by the view out of my window

By Emma Rawlings Smith.

Living in the richest city in the world, you would expect every building on the block to be an iconic example of modernity. Not true. Recently constructed designs are more likely to reflect the traditional Mashrabiya architecture of old, combined subtly with innovative features that make life in the Arabian desert just that little bit more hospitable.

The central wind tower, known in Arabic as a ‘barjeel’, incorporated into the zero-carbon zero-waste Masdar city, collects and drops cooler air to street level. The glass reinforced concrete coating applied to the central souk protects the building from the sandstorms, which regularly blast thousands of tonnes of sand on the city.

My apartment is considered old, in a country which celebrated its fortieth birthday last December. My tower was constructed in the 1970s, as one of the city’s first ‘skyscrapers’, when buildings were ‘only’ 18 floors.

The changes occurring across the city of Abu Dhabi can be seen from my windows. I overlook Khalidiya Gardens – one of many green, public spaces which make up five per cent of the city. Friday, the day when most global citizens are working their last nine-to-five of the week, the people of Abu Dhabi congregate in these family parks around barbeques. The men smoke shisha and discuss the matters of the day, and the women busy themselves with their children.

The charcoal and shisha smoke drifts up and permeates through the air, along with the smells from the underbelly of the city. When the temperatures soar into the forties in the summer months, evaporation from sewage pipes hits the back of the throat of unsuspecting passers-by.

The smells of the city are as diverse as the people and the trades that they follow. Emiratis are distinct in style; the women in black Abayas and the men in white Kanduras. Newcomers to the city are a diverse crowd, and have shops and community services dedicated to their needs.

I love the fact that you can visit a traditional tailor, barber and patisserie right next door to a pottery, dry cleaners and music store selling nothing but Ouds. Further along my street there is even a gramophone shop and a Singer sewing machine shop, both selling goods without need of electricity.

Abu Dhabi is a city full of dichotomies, it is in the midst of reinventing itself, and I am watching it change right from my window.
Place

‘A particular position, point, or area in space; a location’

Oxford English Dictionary

Place ‘is itself part of the way we see, research and write’

Cresswell (2004)

Place is ‘the ways in which students’ lives are connected with other places’

Roberts (2003, p.166)

Place is … ‘constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus.’

Massey (1994)

A sense of place may be defined as ‘the constellation of attitudes a resident or community has with regards its place of residence”

Relph (1974)
My Place - Abu Dhabi

‘Desert outpost to modern paragon’ in 50 years
The drivers of change in Abu Dhabi

• Petro-dollars - Abu Dhabi sits on 98 billion barrels or 8% of proven global crude oil reserves, worth some $12 trillion at current market value (The Report: Abu Dhabi 2010).

• Rapid development and economic diversification - Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan set out a vision for developing the nation (Abu Dhabi 2030 Plan).

• Technology – desalination and A/C are technological solutions for living in the desert, both are highly unsustainable uses of oil.

• ‘Strategic’ location between East and West.
‘sense of place’ – more urban, less nature

Source: E Smith
‘sense of place’ – cars, nationalism, Islam and desire
A rapid urban transition for a planned city
Water facts:

• 1 billion cubic metres of water are desalinated every year
• People use on average 590 litres of water every day
• Groundwater levels are dropping rapidly
• Salinity increase from 18,000 to 36,000 ppm
Population of Abu Dhabi
1975 211,812
2005 1,374,200
2009 1,826,700
2010 1,967,700

The population structure for the United Arab Emirates 2008

Life expectancy is 77 for men and 80 for women (in the UK it is 79 for men and 83 for women)

Healthy Life expectancy is only to 68 years of age

Fertility rates have fallen from 4.4 to 2.3 children per women over 20 years
My identity affects how I see the world

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A framework for learning through enquiry

Roberts (2003) Learning through Enquiry

Reflecting on learning

Creating a need to know

To develop both a ‘sense of place’ and the skills to produce informative extended writing about place

Making sense

To make connections of all sorts

Using data
Strategies for teaching about place

Eliciting existing knowledge of a place

Spider diagram

Bubble diagram

WordFoto app
Strategies for teaching about place
Developing the links between existing knowledge of a place

- Wealth
- Oil reserves
- Abu Dhabi
- Tropics
- Humid
- Arid
- Desert

Concept mapping with hexagons
Strategies for teaching about place

Question generating using place-based images

Question grid @JohnSayer
Strategies for teaching about place

Representation of place

Key Questions:

How has this place been represented?

How far do you agree with this representation of place?

How have places and people in the text been described?

Describe some of the people and places you would include when writing about Abu Dhabi.
Strategies for teaching about place

Enquiring as to why places are similar and different, using the Urban Vignette themes

compared with, in contrast, as with, unlike, like, similarly, equally, more than, greater, lesser
Strategies for teaching about place

Enquiring as to why places are similar and different

Compare and contrast map: Identify similarities and differences for the theme between Abu Dhabi and one other city featured on the Urban Vignettes website. You may not be able to explain the similarities and differences identified until you do some research.

Differences
- City: Abu Dhabi
- Because...
- Because...
- Because...

Similarities
- City: __________
- Because...
- Because...
- Because...

Differences
- Because...
- Because...
- Because...

Overall I think because
because

compared with, in contrast, as with, unlike, like, similarly, equally, more than, greater, lesser
Strategies for teaching about place

Comparing different known places

How do students feel about the place in which they live? Where else have they lived? How do these different experiences compare?

Students in one Year 7 class had lived in Doha, Bahrain, Australia, Pakistan, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, America, Malaysia, Germany, Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and France.

Students are currently creating a report about a migrant’s journey, the migrant being someone they know.
After reading my first blog entry about Abu Dhabi, students critiqued my work. Students highlighted ideas and phrases that worked well and others that did not.

Students discussed what the success criteria could be for their own work.

Students then created their own blog posts which were displayed in the classroom for a Gallery Critique.

Public Critique Rules (Ron Berger, 2003)
- Be Kind, Be Specific, Be Helpful
Strategies for teaching about place

Providing fieldwork opportunities which allow time for reflection

Do you feel satisfaction with this place? How does it affect you?

What lyrics for songs or poems have been written about this place?

How is this city presented in the media? What words are used to describe this place? Are there misconceptions about the city?

What evidence is there of interconnection of this city with other places
Strategies for teaching about place

Feeling ‘in place’ or ‘out of place’

Students were asked to take a photograph of themselves in a place they felt happiest in Abu Dhabi, then in no more than 100 words explain why they chose this place.

On a map of Abu Dhabi students then added post-it notes for those places that they avoided including the reason why. Such affective mapping can be very informative about a city.

Most students are members of the British Club, here they felt ‘in place’ but downtown in Hamdan, the oldest
Strategies for teaching about place

Predicting how a place may change in the future

Creating presentations about planned futures and imaginary futures
References:

I would start with Doreen Massey’s essay ‘A Global Sense of Place’ From Space, Place and Gender (1994) Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press


My place: Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Read about ‘My place: Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates’ in Teaching Geography Spring 2013

Article about Abu Dhabi:


A day on the Devonshire moors
(extended student writing about place)

Waking to a full English breakfast, with Jazz, the old sheepdog snoozing peacefully on our feet, we headed out into the nearby wood to begin our journey through the moors. Dappled light fell onto the leafy ground as with hiked through the wood, heading towards the local village for the classic Devon cream tea. Despite our anticipated lunch, we walked on accompanied, only by our own footfalls and the tweeting of birds in the trees. It is amazing how you can discover a new part of Devon that one has never walked on before. You can make a place your own, private space that you have been the first to discover. This is another thing I love about Devon, the never-ending discoveries you can make, just by enjoying a walk through the woods of a beautiful place.

Emerging onto a bramble path, we made our way up to the local village to the Crumbly Sponge Tea shop, for the well-deserved cream tea. Despite our giant and delicious English breakfast at the start of our day, cream tea and scones with homemade jam and of course clotted cream is the something that Devon stars. No other place on earth could do it how they do. But its not so much the amazing taste of the food, but the atmosphere of the tea shop itself. Amongst the tinkle of tea cups and munching of cake, there is the sound of light conversation, and always, as someone walks in, there are cries of welcome, and come sit at our table, Even if the person is unknown to them. The close community and passion for making people welcome, is also a thing I adore and much admired about this place.