

Shaping Old Sharjah:

A Geospatial Analysis of Biennial Art Exhibitions in Old Sharjah from 2003–2019

Nada Ammagui

Postgraduate Research Fellow

جامعة نيويورك أبوظبي



NYU | ABU DHABI



Photo credits to author

Presentation Outline

- Topical introduction
 - Pre-pandemic workflow
 - Adapting during COVID-19
 - Visualizing the Sharjah Biennial
 - Tools and methods
 - Resulting visualizations
 - Reflections on digital data creation/collection
 - Looking forward
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About the Sharjah Biennial

History

- ❖ Contemporary art exhibition taking place every 2 years featuring dozens of international artists
- ❖ Started in 1993 by a small group of Emirati artists at Sharjah Expo Centre
- ❖ Organized by the Sharjah Art Foundation since 2009

Structure

- ❖ Artworks and installations are displayed at historical sites across the emirate
- ❖ New venues are acquired by the foundation or borrowed for each exhibition
- ❖ Free to attend, plus accompanied by a schedule of tours and performances

Expo Centre Sharjah to Old Sharjah



Photo credits to Sharjah Update



Suchitra Mattai

Imperfect Isometry, 2019

Mixed media installation, vintage saris, rope net, merry-go-round, 2-channel video, chalk, dimensions variable; 2 minutes 46 seconds, loop



Leo Asemota

*The Intrinsic Tendency of
The Ens Sign, 2019*
Multimedia installation,
dimensions variable

**Isabel Lewis, Matthew Lutz-Kinoy,
HACKLANDER / HATAM**
Untitled (inwardness, juice, natures), 2019
Performance and mixed media installation
with audio installation, palm stumps,
acrylic paint on muslin, ceramic cups,
coloured acrylic sheets, dimensions
variable



Photo credits to Sharjah Art Foundation

Original Project Workflow

Site visits

- Gaining a spatial understanding of exhibitions in SHJ
- Visiting venues for SB14 around the emirate

Data collection

- Interviewing SAF leadership about the history and mission of Sharjah Biennial
- Collecting visual evidence and catalogues of the exhibition

Analysis

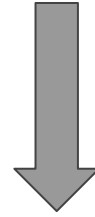
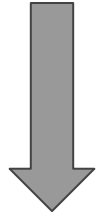
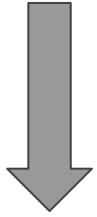
- Employing spatio-anthropological theoretical framework to better understand impact of exhibition layout on local aesthetic values

Adapted COVID Workflow

Site visits

Data collection

Analysis



Data creation

Data analysis

Visualization

Tools & Methodologies

- ❖ Covid-19 impact on interviews, mobility, and March Meeting (pre-biennial panel series)
- ❖ Accessibility and organization of archives at SAF and National Archives

Data creation

- Digital exhibition catalogues
- Google Sheets vs Recogito

Recogito |

Data analysis

- Google Sheets tools
 - Pivot tables



Visualization

- ArcGIS (mapping software)



Visualizing the Sharjah Biennial

Three-step process

1. Data creation

- Lack of publicly-accessible datasets on history of Sharjah Biennial exhibitions
 - Created dataset documenting every artwork shown since 2009 with artist and geospatial information

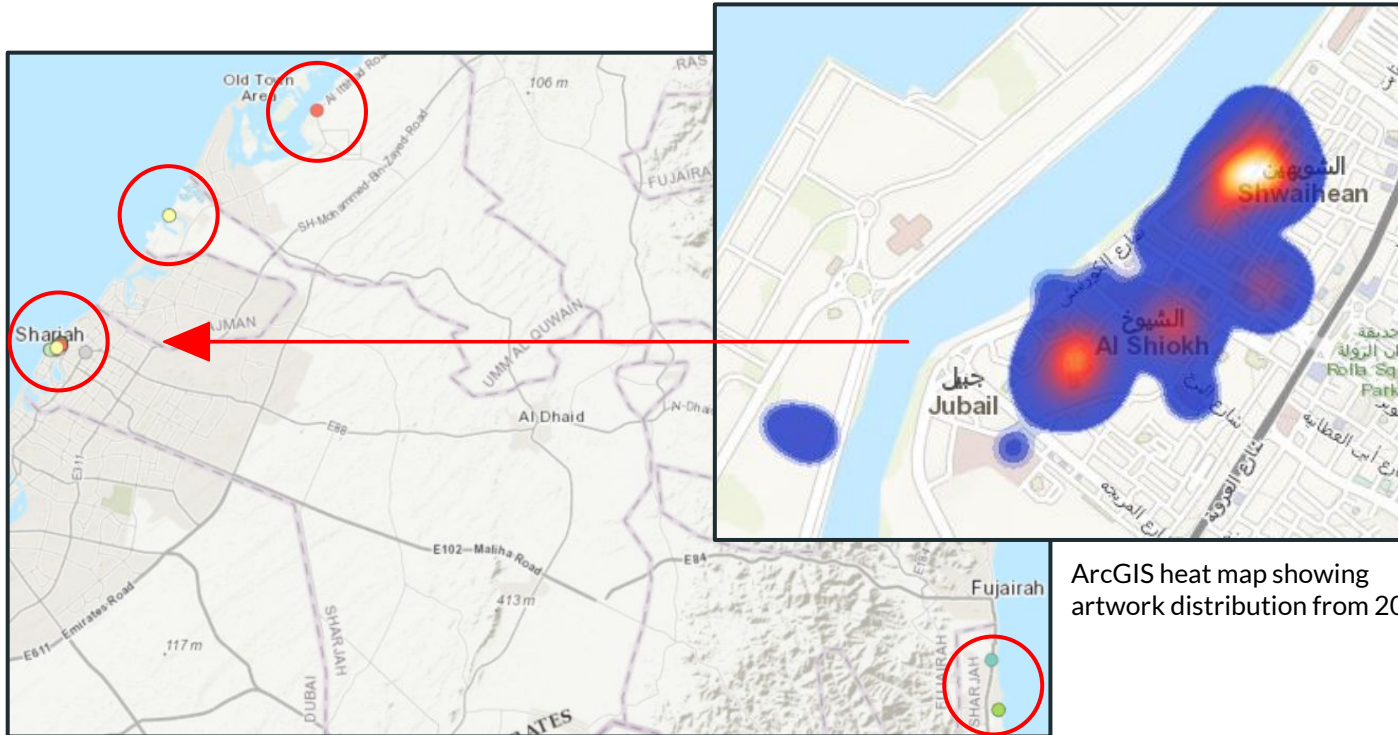
2. Data analysis

- Using Google Sheets functions to conduct meta-analyses of biennial data
 - See patterns in data of exhibitions over time to trace spatial expansion

3. Visualization

- Creating maps in ArcGIS to show concentration of artworks at venues over time
 - Begin to ask questions tied to space-making, socio-political values, and aesthetics

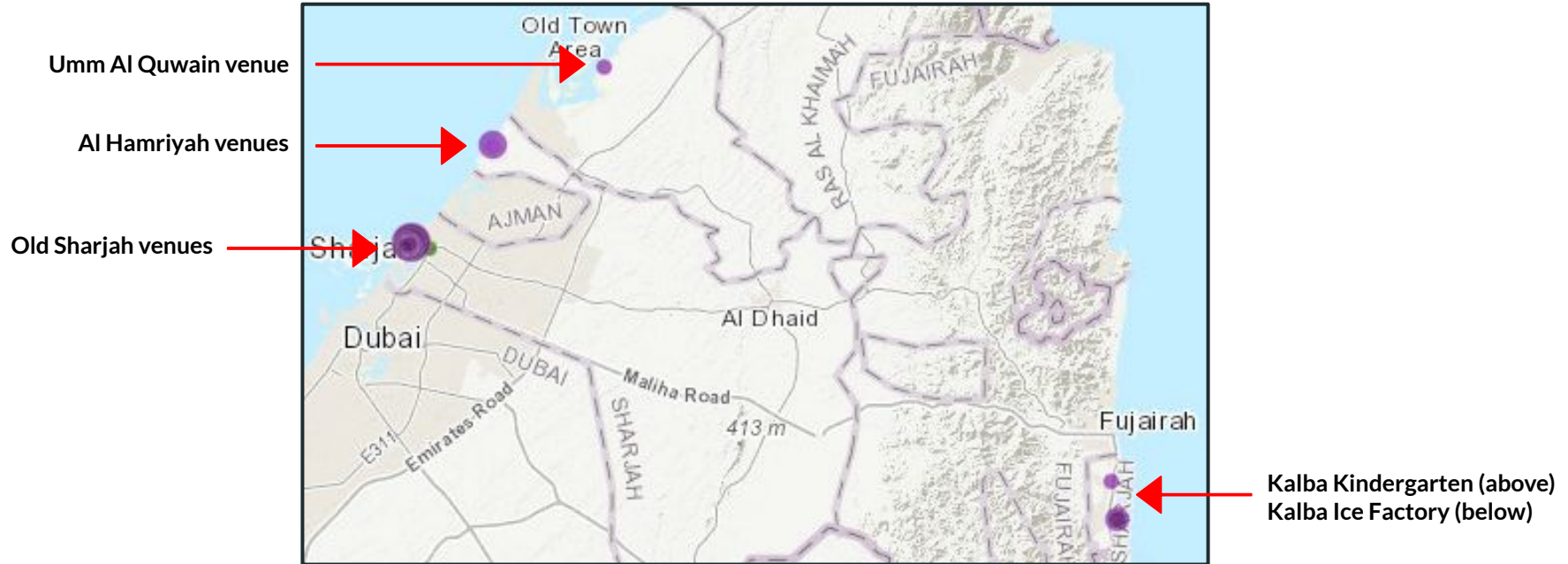
Mapping Exhibition Growth



ArcGIS map showing Sharjah Biennial venue locations

ArcGIS heat map showing artwork distribution from 2009

Tracing Spatial Expansion



ArcGIS map showing later venue acquisition

Takeaways from a Digital Workflow

- ❖ New way to collect and consider data → new questions to ask
 - Greater focus on spatiality of exhibitions and their social implications rather than the artwork or artist selection
- ❖ Working with bilingual textual data
 - Particular context of the Gulf/UAE means navigating texts in Arabic and English
- ❖ Ease of working with geospatial tools in the Arabian Peninsula/MENA
 - Lack of work done so far, not lack of tool availability