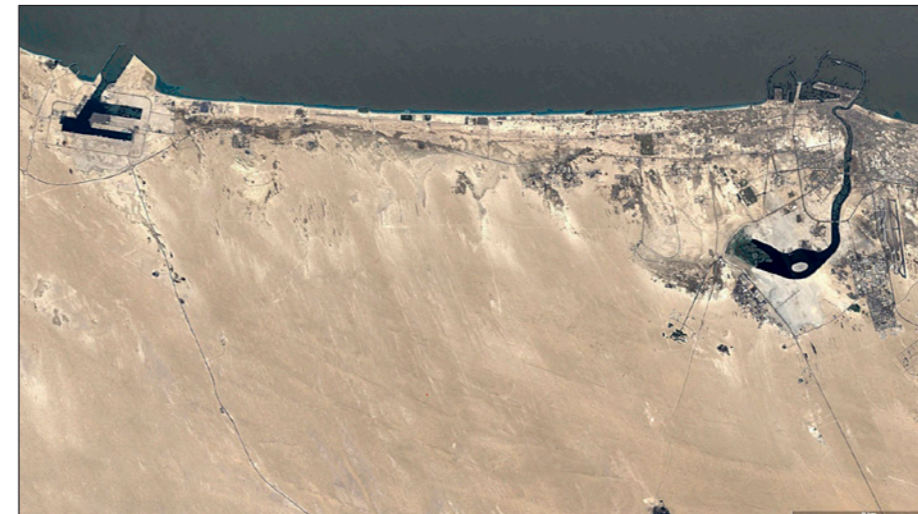


UNTOLD Gardens, A Portrait of the Desert

Mona Azadian

Untold Gardens is a vision that attempts to present an authentic design to the demands of landscapes and gardens in the city of Dubai, UAE. Established by Mona Azadian in 2019, the co-founder of Polis Architecture Front, the vision has formed several gardens in UAE. The concept has environmental, aesthetic, and functional goals in design. The vision is an adaptation from reading the history of gardens in different regions and reflects the cultural role of the garden as an artifact representing the interaction of humans and nature.



Dubai 1984



Dubai 2022



CONTEXT

The massive construction of private housing as part of the fast-paced development of Dubai has turned the face of the desert from an empty canvas into an urban fabric in the last 2 decades. A sprawl of endless rows of houses, each formed behind the setback lines of a tiny stretch of land - the plot - has subdivided the desert into a myriad of micro-deserts, sandy yards between house and fence entitled as gardens. Transforming this yard into a real garden is left to the resident, who may or may not take on this responsibility. Starting up as an inquiry and a research project, Untold Gardens is now established as a vision that introduces an authentic design attitude towards landscapes and gardens in this context.

Since 2018, this vision has shaped several gardens in Dubai, which has an arid desert climate with extremely hot weather and scarce annual rainfall. Due to the city's proximity to the sea and the high humidity level, the conventional trend for urban landscape and plantation is inclined to create a peculiar tropical theme. However, on a small scale - the case of the private gardens - the maintenance of such thirsty tropical vegetation requires big efforts from the residents, as well as a massive water supply, and in many cases, ends in a failure to achieve and sustain the desired environment.

The concept of Untold Gardens was developed to achieve environmental, aesthetic, and functional goals in design. Environmentally, it underlines the necessity of creating a stable equilibrium in the built environment, stressing water preservation and relying on the use of indigenous plantations. Using the native, drought-tolerant plants of the UAE, which endure a significant amount of heat and direct sunlight, is the first element of this agenda, minimizing the need for water supply. This begins with the avoidance of species with high water demand, such as natural lawns.

The aesthetic goal is to depict the grace of vernacular elements in the context of the desert, including native plants and local materials and textures. The use and composition of hardscape versus softscape envisions a 'portrait of the desert', emulating and illustrating an organic proportion of greenery within the desert dunes. This minimalistic stance to how the greenery is positioned can turn every single plant into a statue, each free-standing tree or single shrub becoming a reminder of the native plants' victory in the arid climate of the desert. The borders between greenery and built elements are fading, and the pavings, planters, and vegetation are all blended together.

The functional goal is to create a pleasing exterior space for the day-to-day experience of the habitants with attention to their various cultural backgrounds. The Dubai community is a mixture of various nationalities with different memories and understanding of gardens. To propose an arid garden as a climate-adaptive landscape to people with a memory of other types of spaces, subtropical or Mediterranean gardens, for instance, is a challenging task. The concept seeks an adaptation from readings of the history of gardens in different cultures in the region, as it reflects on the role of the garden as an artifact representing the interaction of humans and nature.

Untold Gardens is both a theoretical framework and a practical scheme for critical reflections on some of the most wasteful processes of development, conceived as an invitation to recall sustainable lifestyles and practices for resource conservation in urban contexts.



Garden at Al Nouf, Sharjah, 2020



Garden at Sustainable City, Dubai, 2021



Garden at Arabian Ranches Dubai, 2020



Garden 22 in Meadows, Dubai, 2019



Garden at Sustainable City, Dubai, 2021

Mona Azadian

Born in 1978 in Tehran, Mona is an Iranian/Hungarian architect, garden designer, and educator. She is the co-founder of Polis Architectural Front, a Dubai-based architectural practice since 2011. In parallel to practice, Mona has been teaching as an architectural design tutor since 2012, sustaining an interaction between practice and academic discourse. She is an assistant professor at the Department of Architecture at XJTU in Suzhou, China. Her work and research primarily focus on educational spaces such as university campuses and schools, xeriscape landscape design, and adaptive-reuse architecture. Mona received an honorable mention prize for designing the Iranian pavilion in the 15th Venice Architecture Biennale 2016 titled "Contemplating the Desert". It is a scheme towards critical thinking on the illusory process of contemporary urban development as well as an invitation to recall sustainable methods of water conservation in traditional urban contexts.