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How I learned to stop loving and worry about Dubai.

Writing, Photos and Soundscape Composition

Three ubiquitous sounds define Dubai, UAE: amplified prayers, unceasing construction noise and air conditioners. Perhaps the next important trade capital in the 21st century, Dubai has emerged out of the sand in only a few decades. How I learned to stop loving and worry about Dubai is a document from the first person perspective using photos, music and text about a city in the middle of its development explosion.

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Listen to the sound composition at: www.stankievech.net/projects/dubai



Terraform: Landing in Dubai ¹

I awoke several thousand feet above the Persian Gulf to such an intense sunrise I was doubtful if I had even fallen asleep during the redevye flight I needed to take for a meeting in the morning in Dubai. Having just finished a workshop at the Architectural Association in London forecasting the catastrophic effects of tourism to come in the next century,² I was arriving in the United Arab Emirates and specifically a city well into the process of turning an economy based on oil reserves (projected to dry up in 2020) into a trade and tourist industry. The city's ambitious goal expects to attract 15 million tourists annually—a number ten times greater than its current population.³ Trying to grasp my bearings temporally and spatially, I was barely able to deal with the sunlight that hit my eyes both directly from the sun and—to compound the problem—by reflecting off the water below. The light was trapped in a double mirror of water and atmosphere, diffused by a thick fog of dust and humidity suspended in the air, looming as a result of sand storms and a temperature of +52°C (a far cry from the minus 51°C weather where I normally live in the Canadian Arctic). Not sure how far off from the coast of the UAE I was—only the pilot's warning to return my seat and tray to the upright and locked position signaling our proximity to dry land—I anticipated the infamous Palm Islands to emerge into view at any moment. After all, Dubai is a city like Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer's Brasilia: uber-designed from the vantage point of the Heavens. Out of the gold-white mist the first sign of life was a tanker, alone and solely forging in the opposite trajectory as my flight. Perhaps the oil transported out was a sign of the current times, and myself flying in as a foreigner was a sign of the times to come. A few more ships and then finally a glimpse of land. It looked like one of the sandbars I remembered from the Great Barrier Reef, however this atoll was not an organic flowing shape like the ones I recalled; it was a sandbar being sculpted not by millennia of natural forces, but by a few months. Was this island a déjà vu of Venice, an echo of one of the first global cities that spearheaded the dawn of a new international economy 500 years earlier? Another ship moved into view, only this time a barge, perhaps with sand dredged from the Gulf bed heading to the destination of a new island. I was on the port side of the plane and so I could not see the infamous Palm Jumeirah archipelago that had amazed me while I zipped around the globe on Google Earth, trying to comprehend the difference between CGI and reality. Instead I was looking at an experiment in radical terraforming that was the most recent of Dubai's ambitions—Palm Deira, three times larger, half formed and almost completely desolate, save a few construction



1. My thanks to James Kirkpatrick (EDAW), Tom Erbe (Soundhack), and Don Lino for their kindness and assistance during the research and production of this work.

2. This research was collected in Y-Z London: A Century of Tourism. Eds. Jonathan D Solomon and Max Kehlen. Project publication coming out of the AA program London Ever After. August 2008. Download an excerpt of the publication at: http://www.stankieveh.net/dwn/Stankieveh_AADialogue-web.pdf

3. Two targeted works of interest discussing the event of Dubai: Cities from Zero. Ed. Shumon Basar. Architectural Association Press: London, 2007 and Al Manaka. Eds. Rem Koolhaas, Mitra Khoubrou & Ole Bouman. Volume. Iss.#12. Amsterdam: Archis, 2007.

sites and the ubiquitous cranes I was to see again and again throughout my stay. Eventually, the more traditional coastline between ocean and desert came into view, and on the horizon, tucked under the wing of the plane, a city of skyscrapers emerged from the haze of a city sandwiched between the shifting spaces of water and sand. From the air it was easy to see, Dubai is a city with no fear or guilt of infinite expansion in either direction. British Airways flight 109 touched down on a soft tarmac laced with sand, the new foundation for an inverse colonialism.



Construction: Dubai's Destruction of the Speed Limit

- 400,000 immigrant labourers each day assembling the construct of Dubai.
- -4° C inside Ski Dubai at Mall Emerites while its 52°C outside.
- Specially formulated concrete that does not cure before flowing 634m up the Burj Dubai skyscraper.
- Manufactured islands in the shape of palm trees that jet out into the Gulf several kilometres.
- 180 skyscrapers being built simultaneously around the largest man-made marina in the world.
- 15-25% of the world's construction cranes

The magnitude of construction in Dubai is overwhelming, as are the statistics floating around what one might call the event of Dubai. It feels as if there are more cranes than streetlights. The dramatic entrance to a rapidly developing Dubai is the yellow brick road called the Sheikh Zayed, a highway that runs parallel to the coast and is lined on either side with skyscrapers each competing for the driver's attention. But there is no depth here, only epic verticality. The cluster of skyscrapers—including the world's tallest structure (of any class)—in Dubai is not based on a radial pattern that spirals out from a centrepiece nor is it spread out in a grid pattern. Instead Dubai is a corridor of buildings-as-advertisements towering over the car as it zips along the highway at top speed. There's something telling about driving through 'downtown' at 130 km/h.





But the speed I am referring to is not only the result of the highway design of the business core, it resides in the sheer speed of construction in Dubai—something on par with the fantastical designs. The irony is that under the real buildings are real billboards, which are advertising more buildings that are not yet real. But the real is fuzzy here, like the haze that lingers in the air supporting mirages and rumours of fantastic building projects that cannot sound too preposterous, or like the blur as seen from a Land Cruiser window while looking out at the Jumeirah beach. Along this desert strip (reminiscent of another desert city in America), there is an uncanny similarity between the functioning of the façades of the buildings and the faces of the billboards—both icons for the production of a new global identity. The function of the physical building and the poster building begins to disappear as the speed of construction and acceleration of perspective merge: hyperreal images luring the tourists to Dubailand.⁴

Probably the most visited piece of architecture along the Sheikh Zayed is the Mall of the Emirates, which (in fear of using another superlative that is difficult to verify) is self-labeled as “the world’s first shopping resort”—complete with another ecosystem inside. I’m referring, of course, to the ski hill, which everyone from polar to equatorial regions stares at through glass panes. Two storeys of glass walls separate the food court (complete with McDonald’s and Starbucks) from the frozen wonderland of snowballs and chairlifts. It is hard to imagine coldness on the other side of the glass, but when you think about it, the switch from the +50°C outside temperature to the mild 22°C stabilised throughout the mall is not really any different from the 22°C

4. Dubailand, while possibly synonymous for the entire touristic aspect of Dubai, is also the name for a massive theme park to open in 2010.



to the -4°C —actually it is less if my calculation is correct, and so simply standing in the air conditioned mall begins to feel outrageous.⁵ Seeing everyone inside the oversized meatlocker wearing the same uniform parka distributed with the price of admission is as uncanny as a group of women wearing burqas standing in the newspaper shop, staring through the narrow slits in their veils making remarks about the latest fashions in Vogue. But with the snow falling and people slipping on ice, I was transported into the Christmas mood: shopping. And there was definitely no lack of choice among the international shops, which are just as much at home in London and NYC as they are now in the Middle East. Even with the necessity of fashion's preemptive market delivery, there was a slight irony in buying a winter jacket during August in the desert, but one has to remember Dubai is tax-free. Perhaps the Emir's plan of tourism and trade is working, flourishing in the thirteen free zones designated to attract foreign investors while liberalizing an Islamic state to astonishing levels.⁶ Who would have thought people would flock to the desert for a holiday? But here no ecosystem is beyond construction: snow covered ski hills in one of the hottest place on the globe or a luxurious water park filled with desalinated water sandwiched between the desert and the saltwater of the Gulf.



5. While it is easy to dismiss the ski hill as exorbitant, it is nothing new. West Edmonton Mall in Canada constructed in the 1980s had a massive tropical wave pool much larger in square-footage than Ski Dubai. While outside temperatures annually reach -30°C in Edmonton, the average 20°C in the normal shopping arcades provided an artificial adjustment in temperature ranging 50°C as well—as swing present in all indoor housing of that region.

6. With all the islands surfacing on the coastline of Dubai, one is tempted to connect UAE's economic and ideological free zones with theorist Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zones.



Nomads: Desert Islands

Dubai is already a nexus. With the majority of cities GDP coming from trade, it is geographically located at the funnel of the Persian Gulf and strategically positioned to connect the Middle East with the growing economies of China and India. Dubai International Airport already hosts 105 airlines servicing 145 destinations, acting as a major stopover from Australasia to Europe. Because of the UAE's designated free zones (meaning ownership of real-estate in such a zone can be held by non-nationals, or that a company need not comply to the minimum 51/49% national/foreign ownership requirement) Foreign Direct Investment has steadily grown contributing to massive real-estate and construction projects. Epic infrastructural development is managed by the state run corporations Nahkeel and Emaar (the organisations behind the archipelago projects known as the Palms Islands and the World) but capital from US and international markets are now investing in Dubai's real estate market estimated to reach \$50 billion by 2010.⁷

But what does this mean on the ground, while one moves through Dubai? First of all, there are three ubiquitous sounds in Dubai: amplified prayers, unceasing construction noise and air conditioners. The mix of noise is unique to Dubai and provides a dense soundscape the inhabitants are continually immersed in. For the visitor, the majority of Dubai is practically inaccessible. Islamic culture is fond of gated residences where women can move freely without coverings and Mosques are sacred places of



7. Statistics come from UN reports or the state sanctioned Dubai Statistical Center: respectively, http://unstats.un.org/unsd/newsletter/unsd_workshops/country/UAE_Country%20Profile.pdf and <http://www.statisticsdubai.ae>.

worship typically restricted to followers. Another part of Dubai caters to the ultra-elite and wealthy, symbolized by Donald Trump investments and the extravagances of the Emirs. And of course there is the much-discussed flipside of the construction: the gated workers camps crammed full of men from such countries as Pakistan.⁸ But Dubai is extremely liberal for an Islamic state and opens its arms to the tourist and (for both better and worse) for the migrant worker. In the big picture, however, the majority of Dubai is inaccessible simply from the fact that at the moment it is a giant construction site: e.g. the Marina with 180 skyscrapers being built simultaneously, the new Airport zone, the Burj Dubai Business Bay, or Dubailand are inaccessible to the public at the moment and account for an island mentality that does not just refer to the literal archipelagos in the Gulf. While Dubai as a modern city is extremely young, it does not have a masterplan with comprehensive infrastructure. Instead it has grown as a city of little cities, islands in the desert that surface as an oasis here and there: a constellation of experimental zones.⁹ While a trip to the World Islands necessitated being airborne, I soon realised I also needed to charter a helicopter to access the constructions sites around the rest of Dubai.

With the haze still thick, I ventured into the air again for a macroscopic view of the city. What I saw was a city oscillating between beach paradises and the apocalypse. The first projects to view were the World and Palm developments. The World archipelago is basically as its name describes: a collection of 300 man-made islands arranged as an atlas of the world. Estimated at \$30 million each, the super wealthy can buy an island in the shape of a country or region such as Greenland or Baffin Island, but this fee only secures the sand that has been dredged into a nebulous form. Buyers would still need to supply their own infrastructure, including desalinated water, power and transportation—not to mention the architecture. The plan is a radical evolution of the gated communities initially experimented with in Florida and is perhaps an interesting antithesis to the Israeli settlements in Palestine also informed by the same history of 20th century residential planning.¹⁰ Aiming to create a lasting engineering feat on the historical scale of the Pyramids, the island projects are an aggressive strategy to attract international attention and investments. But the “island” strategy does not stop with the literal islands. All of Dubai is designed as islands connected by highways, each island city branded with a unique purpose: Internet City, Garden City, Festival City, Maritime City, and so on. Much like the suburbs of North America, Dubai is based on car culture. Lacking any functioning light rail transit in a climate of unbearably hot temperatures, the air-conditioned vehicle in the land of oil is the mode of transport between one area and another. While developers attempt to massively disruptive the natural environment, one reality remains: the extreme temperature in the summer, which seals off the outside to create the cool bubbles of malls, hotels, and skyscrapers.



Another reason for the island layout resides in the ambition to create Dubai from a tabula rasa. Individual urban planners and firms are designing hermetic “cities” in Dubai based on singular philosophies undeterred by previous infrastructure or history. There are the spectacle projects based on themes echoing EPCOT,¹¹ but there are also zones being designed as urban experiments on a 1:1 scale. Rem Koolhaas’s Waterfront City is a collection of his past urban studies—from Delirious New York to Lagos Go-Slow—extracted out of book form and executed in block form...city blocks that is. A 1.5 billion square foot island, Waterfront City will attempt to create a utopist density/congestion lacking in the rest of Dubai’s plans of estate islands and 600 kilometers of artificially created beachfront property. Only designed with four access points via bridges onto the square island, Koolhaas is hoping to trap the vibrancy inspired by proximity, electrifying his Manhattanesque grid. Designing not just for form or icon but for the function of the community, who is the citizen of Koolhaas’s island? If over-speculation doesn’t crash the market, and waterfront property continues to demand such high prices, the average citizen will be well above average wealth. Most likely, they will be citizens much like Koolhaas himself: the global citizen and modern nomad who teaches in North America, lives in London, and runs a firm in the Netherlands, all while continually traveling to build or study sites around the world.¹²

The idea of the nomad brought me full circle. While in Dubai it is almost easy to forget Dubai the country is only 30 odd years old, and the desert here was once, not so long ago, the shifting landscape of nomads. The last night in Dubai, I fully embraced the contemporary nomadic role of the tourist and went 4x4ing into the desert near Oman. I’ve never been surrounded by such a vast desert. On the evening we drove out into the dunes, there was an intense sand storm, forcing me to buy a keffiyeh and wrap my entire head to protect my eyes and mouth from the onslaught of sand. Through the sunglasses and cloth, I could literally see the sand shifting and curling off the dunes, constantly

8. The double bind of the immigrant worker situation is no work or money at home or horrible living conditions with little money in Dubai.

9. For an optimistic review of learning from Dubai’s “island” development strategy, see: Amale Andraos. “Dubai’s Island Urbanism: An Archipelago of Difference for the 21st Century.” *Cities From Zero*. Ed. Shumon Basar. London: AA Press, 2007.

10. Executed for different purposes, Israel opted for the panopticon design and Dubai for the smooth space of free zones and island resorts. For the relation between Florida’s communities and Israeli settlements, see Eyal Weizman’s *Hollow Land*, particularly the chapter “Settlements: Optical Urbanism.” London: Verso, 2007.

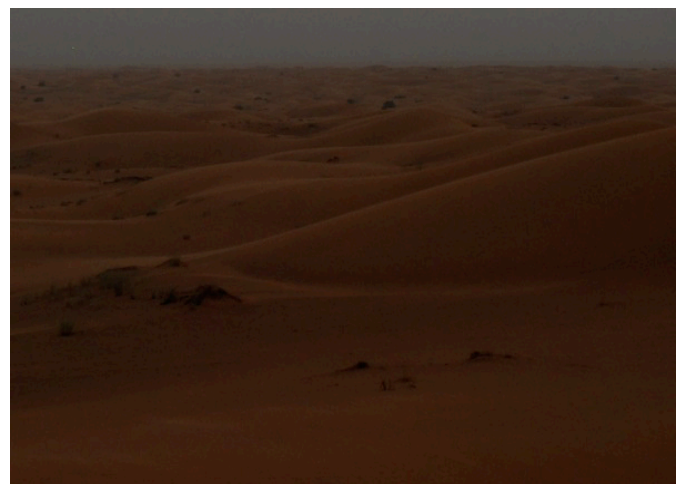
11. E.P.C.O.T. = Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow.

creating a liquid landscape that in the morning would be substantially different. After several hours of driving (in what could have easily been circles for all I knew), we settled in an evening camp to eat a meal in tents that failed to keep the sand from flying over the food. The packaged deal would not have been complete without the cliché apotheosis of the evening: a belly dance. The dancer was from Russia, possibly because this was a loophole for the woman to avoid covering her body, or maybe because the temporary campsite managed by a conglomeration of enterprises was a ‘temporary autonomous zone’ catering to the desires of foreigners. Regardless, the sad scene of camera flashes and bad music broadcast over a fledgling PA system drove me out of the tent and into the darkness of the desert.

The sun had set, despite the motto “The sun never sets on Dubai world,”¹³ and what the darkness did not swallow, the sand enwrapped. Walking away from the camp and up the side of a tall dune, I reassured myself I would not get lost as I could always navigate my way back by listening to the blaring music. But as I ascended and attempted to peer through the narrow slit in the cloth around my face (worn with moderate success), the sound was modulated and cut by the wind. Standing in the darkness of the desert and looking towards a faint glow on the horizon, possibly emanating from Dubai, the music was awash not only by the violent movement of the air but with the billions of sand particles sculpting and filtering the sound, slowly destroying any recognition and leaving me with the empty desert as a sublime event. With all the hype of Dubai as the new city of the 21st century, bolstered by large amounts of liquid revenues and focused with an autocratic vision to build a new nation, the desert reminded me as I stood alone of the last lines from Ozymandias:

“Nothing beside remains: round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

At the moment of construction Dubai looks much how I imagine it will look upon its destruction. Once the white noise of air-conditioners stop and the white noise of sand storms resume, how will the nomadic nexus of Dubai have weathered?



12. “REM: Do you know that in the past week I’ve been swimming in Lagos, in Milan, in Switzerland, in Rotterdam, in London, in L.A., and in Las Vegas?” quoted from the interview with Jennifer Sigler in Index Magazine in 2000. Archived here: http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/rem_kool-haas.shtml

13. The tagline for Dubai’s largest holding company, consciously subverting the British colonialist slogan “The sun never sets on the British Empire” and thus proposing the UAE as the next historical empire overtaking its previous master.