

the subheadings of Authenticity, Continuity, and Durability as the key factors underpinning the sound development of all cities.

DUBAI: WHOSE CITY?

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ABSTRACT

As the world's cities compete in an increasingly competitive and uncertain global financial cauldron, they seek to exploit elements of local identity to leverage ever greater investment shares. If such identity is absent or inadequate then, through necessity, it must be created. Authenticity is no longer a prerequisite for the celebration and commodification of local identity, as exemplified by the case of Dubai, now the largest city in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The prevailing feature of Dubai's rapid economic and social development has been the creation of a majority polyglot population, living and working in the Emirate without citizenship status and primordial local roots. In such an environment decision-making processes regarding planning and matters of identity have taken on a top-down quality without the need to achieve a broad popular consensus. The city has become a captive of the moment, formulated after the needs and demands of developers with a celebration of the special and the spectacular rather than an emphasis on sustainability. Focusing on the latter, Swedish planners have stressed four starting points for city planning, these are the provision of an arena of free economy, maintaining an everyday milieu for most inhabitants, an emphasis on heritage retention, and as a place which creates and consumes resources. Accordingly, this paper will examine the situation in Dubai, assessing the extent to which these four points have been addressed under

INTRODUCTION

Today, as the world's cities compete in an increasingly competitive and uncertain global financial cauldron, they seek to gain leverage over ever greater investment shares. By stressing local identity (read authenticity), cities regardless of size privilege their own stories and attempt to distinguish themselves from their urban adversaries. By emphasizing their own special character and highlighting aspects of beauty and history, investors are seduced, tourists are attracted and local citizens are made proud of their city. Somewhat paradoxically, this reinforcement of identity is becoming increasingly important at a time when the world seems to be becoming smaller and cities are getting confusingly similar. In order to strengthen the identity of a place, to maintain continuity, whatever is built anew should result in an additional layer contributing to an overall 'sense of place'. In this way the city might be regarded as a palimpsest, bearing both old and new features and where one element does not act to completely obscure another. If such identity is absent or inadequate then, through necessity, it must be created. This has resulted in too many cities with skyscrapers rising side by side as symbols of urban modernity and economic success, but merely serving the needs and demands of the moment without reference to the past. Accordingly such actions raise questions on the durability of such constructions, both in the manner of gaining greater leverage within the global capital market and in their relevance to people on the ground.

Writing over thirty years ago Gerald Burke offered some thoughts on the future of townscapes where historic centres would not be able to withstand pressures for redevelopment which would consist of 'tall and bulky buildings that would dominate and eventually take over the scene'.² At that time he

¹ Sassen, S. (2001) "Cities in the global economy" in Paddison, R. (ed.) *Handbook of Urban Studies* London: Sage, pp. 256–272.

² Burke, G. (1976) *Townscapes* Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, p. 213.

could not have envisioned the spectacular levels of construction now characteristic of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a federation of seven somewhat disparately sized states located beside the Persian Gulf in the southeast of the Arabian Peninsula. In the mid-2000s the UAE became the world's fastest growing economy and its level of GDP per capita is now among the highest in the world. While natural resources are still an important source of revenue, recent emphasis has been on economic diversification to expand manufacturing and service industries.

PICTURE 1.
The Dubai skyline.



Leading this surge is Dubai, where a massive US\$350 billion construction programme is currently underway to create inter alia the world's tallest building, the largest shopping mall, the most expensive airport and a veritable flotilla of artificial marine constructions including a number of 'palm' peninsulas and 'The World' archipelago. Further construction of islands representing the 'Universe' has been announced, where the islands will take the shape of the sun, moon, planets and other elements of the solar system. Tourism and recreation will be enhanced

by ‘Dubailand’, an entertainment park twice the size of Disney World when completed in 2012, and Dubai Sports City which is being built to Olympic size specifications.

PICTURE 2.

View from the beach northeast of the creek.



In creating the future townscape, it seems that the designers and developers of Dubai have borrowed unashamedly from other cultures and periods and now, with 22 recently completed constructions over 200 metres high, seek to emulate the skylines of New York City and Hong Kong. The image created by Dubai is one of exclusivity and extravagance. The city aims to be the epicentre of world tourism bringing new standards to the industry as tourist arrivals are predicted to increase from 7.5 million in 2006, through 15 million by 2010 and to a projected 40 million by 2015, when Dubai itself will have a population of 3 million. But if authenticity can be sidelined in the pursuit of progress, and continuity so easily compromised as Dubai has broken with the past to forge a new image, what does the future hold in terms of durability? How endurable are Dubai’s spectacular constructions likely to prove, not just in providing tantalizing tourism spaces for occasional visitors but also building a rooted sense of genius loci amongst its citizenry? What price the human dimension within Dubai’s studied ‘placelessness’?

For those denied access to the trappings of exclusivity and extravagance the notion of a ‘liveable city’ must also be addressed as the architects of Dubai grapple with the intricacies of economic growth imperatives.

AUTHENTICITY OR (RE)CREATING THE PAST?

The earliest histories of the area are immersed in legend, the fabled land of Dilmun being part of Sumerian creation myth as the ‘Land of Paradise’ and ‘Home of the Gods’.

PICTURE 3.

Model of the Al Fahidi Fort in Dubai Museum.



According to Robert G. Hoyland, recent archaeological excavations suggest that, between 2,500 and 1,750 BC, the area we now know as east Arabia enjoyed an economic boom as import-export agents prospered through international trade. Also, in the Greco-Roman period, the area was particularly active as

a trading link between Mesopotamia, Iran and India.³ It is believed that the natural sheltered harbour afforded by the small Dubai Creek offered a convenient port of call on the ancient trade route through the Gulf, and pearl diving in its shallow waters provided a mainstay for such coastal trading activities over thousands of years. Away from the coast local Bedouin tribes lived nomadic lives with herds of camels, goats, sheep or cattle, migrating inland during the rainy season and in the dry season settling near oases to harvest crops of dates, millet and wheat. While nomad-sedentary relations have been portrayed as inherently antagonistic, this may not have been the general case. Hoyland makes the point that ‘despite all their fighting talk, Arab nomads were economically dependent on the settlements along their migratory routes’.⁴

Unfortunately, a lack of detailed documentary evidence on the coastal and oasis livelihoods which characterised this particular stretch of coastline has left somewhat of a vacuum to be filled by idyllic, yet bland, images of countless seasonal movements and willing communal labour. The modern history of Dubai is only dated back to the construction of the Al Fahidi Fort, erected in the late eighteenth century, as the area grew in importance due to the expansion of the pearl trade. Thereafter the focus turns to the establishment of Dubai in 1833 by the Al Bu Falasa branch of the Bani Yas clan, which moved from Abu Dhabi to take up residence in Dubai. This secession was supported by the British, who had earlier backed the southern-based Bani Yas tribe against their rivals in the north, the Qawasim, a powerful tribal confederacy based in Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah, whom the British consistently portrayed as pirates.⁵ Since that time, leadership of Dubai has remained

³ Hoyland R. G. (2001) *Arabia and the Arabs* Routledge, London & New York, pp. 13-14.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 98.

⁵ Graz, L. (1992) *The Turbulent Gulf* I. B. Tauris, London & New York, pp. 195-196.

within the ruling Maktoum family and succession, although not without its contestations, has generally been a peaceful process, unlike the situation in neighbouring ruling families. Abu Dhabi experienced a long period of instability, characterised by acts of fratricide, followed the death of the longstanding leader Sheikh Zayid bin Khalifah (1855-1909). Even worse has been the situation in Sharjah where, since 1866, most rulers ‘have been either deposed or murdered’.⁶

Today, the Dubai Museum, now housed in the restored Al Fahidi Fort, portrays the ‘old charm and bustle of commercial life along the banks of this fabled waterway’ through a series of dioramic reconstructions of activities such as boat building, fishing and marketing. Combinations of the tangible and intangible, material and mystical, natural and built heritage are exhorted to firmly ground the official heritage of Dubai in its historical maritime context. Hyperbole would seem mandatory in such a setting, so too the omission of references to the period of colonial domination whereby the ‘Pirate Coast’ gave way to the ‘Trucial States’ as British interests in particular dictated a policy of divide and rule.⁷

⁶ Zahlan, R. S. (1989) *The Making of the Modern Gulf States* Unwin Hyman, London, p. 98.

⁷ Al Fahim, M. (1995) *From Rags to Riches: A Story of Abu Dhabi* The London Centre of Arab Studies, London.

PICTURE 4 PICTURE 5
Spice and gold in the Deira souks.



By the late 1870s, Dubai is frequently characterised as the ‘principal port’ on the Gulf coast and, by the turn of the century reputed to have had the ‘largest souks’ in Arabia, selling gold, spices and all manner of goods. The role of the *dhow*s, possibly the earliest form of traditional sailing ships which not only plied the waters of the Gulf, but journeyed east to India and south to Zanzibar in East Africa, is presented as an integral part of this trade.⁸

Much attention is given to the history of the pearling industry, as the mainstay of the city’s prosperity until the economic depression of the 1930s and subsequent development of cultivated pearls. The perils and sufferings experienced by those who dived up to sixty times a day, to depths of fourteen fathoms (25 metres), without the assistance of mechanical apparatus apart from a nose-clip, ear wax and finger protectors, are now celebrated as part of the Gulf’s heritage. The mystique of the industry has been enhanced by the element of chance involved in the operation. Empty shells could lead to mounting debts, while one prized pearl (today’s lottery jackpot) could

⁸ “Historical Dubai”, *Dubai Museum in Al Fahidi Fort*, Brochure, 2007.

change lives for ever. Fortune, hardship, romance and stories of the sea combined to produce a heady mix, as described in British government reports from the 1920s;

Until they clear the harbour the boats are propelled by heavy oars, each pulled by two men, who sing the song of the pearlers as they row. Often the fleet returns at night when the moon and the tide are full. The sound of the sailors chanting and the splash of the oars is carried across the still water to the town. The sight of hundreds of white sails, some of them coloured orange by the light of the fires burning on the decks, is one of the most picturesque in the world.

The industry may be no more but Dubai still lays claim to the heritage associated with pearling, and in October 2008 announced that the Dubai Pearl Exchange, a subsidiary of the Dubai Multi Commodities Centre (DMCC), would host the first World Pearl Forum with the¹⁰ objective of bringing together global pearl leaders in Dubai.

Particularly instructive here is the attention that the Dubai Museum gives to the story of Dubai’s urban development as it progressed from a small local ‘backwater’ to the present day ‘globalopolis’. Of the oldest settlements that originally grew up alongside the small creek, Deira on the eastern bank held the largest concentration of houses and souks which were the preserve of traders who had emanated from the wider region, and included Arabs, Persians and Indians. Even now the gold, perfume and spice souks still occupy this area. Dubai, on the western side was somewhat smaller and contained fewer houses and souks, while Al Shindagha at the mouth of the creek

⁹ For hundreds of years the finest pearls were found in the waters of the Persian Gulf http://www.sheikhmohammed.co.ae/vgn-ext-templating/v/index.jsp?vgnextoid=6dea4c8631cb_4110VgnVCM100000b0140a0aRCRD2008-10-10

¹⁰ http://www.gulfnews.com/BUSINESS/Special_Events/10249900.html 2008-10-10

contained the residences of the royal family. Today, the heritage village at Shindagha attempts to recreate aspects of Bedouin life with traditional *barasti* huts made from the date palm. Its trunk formed the structure and the walls and ceilings were covered with netted frond tied with ropes. Buildings of this design still housed the majority of the area's population well into the mid-twentieth century. Other, more durable houses were constructed from readily available materials by local builders who used both sea stones, with limestone to cement the stones together, and shell stones, for building walls.¹¹

PICTURE 6

PICTURE 7

Left: One of the modern *abras* crossing the Dubai Creek from Deira to the western side.

Right: Windtower on the roof – *Al Barajeel*.



The overriding impression of old Dubai, as displayed by the Museum, is of a settlement adapted to its environment, while also reflecting the teachings of Islam and the prevailing social structure. Persian migrants introduced 15 metres-high wind towers which acted as ventilators expelling the scorching heat while also directing cooling breezes downwards into the living quarters of summer houses (*masayf*). Winter houses (*mashait*) came with courtyards designed to provide ventilation and light. The narrow streets and alleys offered protection from the sun for both pedestrians and beasts of burden. Local water taxis

¹¹ "Historical Dubai".

(*abras*) plying between fixed landing points connected the two sides of the creek.¹² Outside the museum, some of this atmosphere is still retained within the Bastakiya quarter of central Bur Dubai, named after the Persian traders who migrated from the area of Bastak, a town in present-day Iran. Here, and also across the creek in Deira, where the dhow wharves are still the focus of a thriving entrepôt trade which traverses the wider region, elements of an earlier Dubai can still be experienced. Elsewhere however, the city has for the most part lost its earlier intimacy with the sea, but which is now depicted in the official archival displays and reconstructed dioramas.

PICTURE 8.

Loading an unloading goods from the boats in the old Dubai Creek harbour, a place that never sleeps.



¹² "Historical Dubai".

PLANNING FOR CONTINUITY?

Much of this lost intimacy is due to an urban planning process which began with the creation of the municipal council in 1957.¹³ In response to the increasing opportunities offered by the expansion of oil exploration in the region, Sheikh Maktoum initiated a series of port improvements which took place during the late-1950s. Dredging of the narrow creek provided shelter for coastal steamers up to 500 tons, while at the same time overcoming its earlier tide-bound character which had restricted use by local shipping. This move advantaged Dubai in comparison with its local neighbour Sharjah, and ever increasing demand quickly prompted the need for additional facilities. The resulting deep water harbour, opened in October 1972 and named Port Rashid after the new Sheikh, was to fundamentally change the character of the coastline. But not only that, as Frauke Heard-Bey writes of the Dubai of the 1970s;

Within a space of ten years Dubai was transformed: multi-storey buildings now overshadow the fine wind towers, the old fort has been converted to a museum ... hotels catering for businessmen from all over the world now stand on the other side of the creek. A road tunnel has been driven under the creek, and a second bridge near the inland end of the creek.¹⁴

Overcoming the restrictive nature of the original creek was just the first step along a path which has led the city away from its maritime heritage and environmental roots, a journey which over the last three decades has taken Dubai into the realms of architectural fantasyland.

Superlative is now commonplace in descriptions of Dubai. Take for example the 18 June 2006 *Gulf News Report* which revealed that a grand total of 30,000 construction cranes were

¹³ Zahlan, R. S. (1989), p. 96.

¹⁴ Heard-Bey, F. (1982) *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates* Longman, London, pp. 263-264.

operating in Dubai, accounting for 24 per cent of the world's supply.¹⁵ The tower crane became a metaphor for progress in Dubai, reaching higher and higher within a city portrayed as a succession of gigantic building projects. While 'works in progress' have been the stuff of history, from the Egyptian pyramids to the Empire State Building, never before had the world been able to monitor day to day building progress through a continuous stream of virtual imagery. The Burj Dubai website,¹⁶ which contains regular updates, photos, facts and a blog forum, is just one example of the many sites devoted to the world's tallest building.¹⁷ Yet, from this site one may click onto the Nakheel Tower,¹⁷ a construction scheduled to be over 1,000 metres in height when it is finished in some ten years time. This will be the new 'icon' for Dubai, declared at a time when the current icon was still a year away from completion.

Other websites add to the imagery. Wikipedia¹⁸ lists 40 buildings in Dubai standing at least 180 metres tall, this list does not include another 60 or so buildings still under construction, including the Burj Dubai due for completion in 2009, and the Pentominium (due 2011) designed to be the world's tallest all-residential building.

¹⁵ *Gulf News Report* <http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/06/06/18/10047703.html> 2008-10-09

¹⁶ <http://burjdubaiskyscraper.com/index.html> 2008-10-13

¹⁷ http://burjdubaiskyscraper.com/Nakheel_Harbour_Tower/Nakheel_harbour_tower.html 2008-10-13

¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_tallest_buildings_in_Dubai 2008-10-13

PICTURE 9 PICTURE 10

Is it the spectacular itself that has come to represent a unique Dubai identity?

Left: The *Burj Dubai*, here of more than 600 meters height, “world’s tallest”. In the foreground construction of the new rail communication system underway.

Right: Evening sun light reflected in the glass of the *Burj Al Arab* hotel.



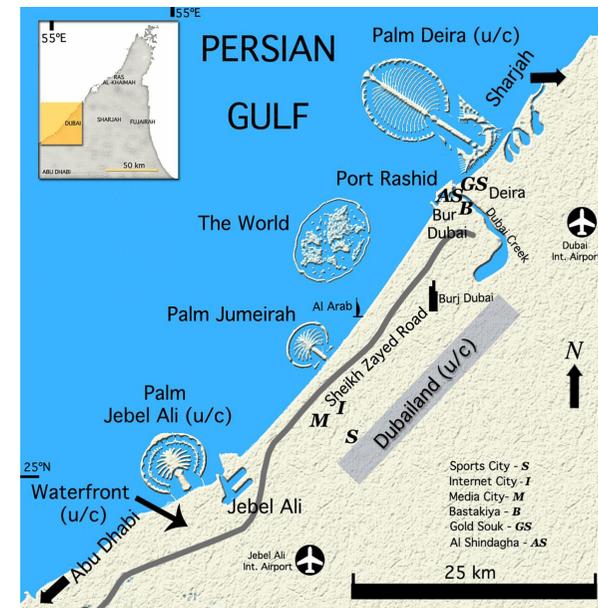
Furthermore, another 21 approved and 19 proposed buildings, including the Nakheel Tower (due 2020), are on the drawing boards. Less tall, but equally spectacular constructions include Hydropolis, the world’s first underwater luxury resort, the aforementioned Sports City and Eco-Tourism World in Dubai. A site just across the border in nearby Ras Al Khaimah is slated for the UAE Spaceport.¹⁹ Still in the realms of fantasy, but rich in imagery are proposals such as ‘The Cloud’ a resort city elevated 300 metres into the air, architect Zaha Hadid’s dancing towers featuring ‘three buildings which rise up from

¹⁹ http://images.businessweek.com/ss/06/03/dubai/index_01.htm 2008-10-13

the ground bending and intertwining with each other to create fluid animation of the forms’ and the Da Vinci rotating tower, 250 metres high and capable of shifting its shape.²⁰ The dedicated website states that ‘now you can reserve an apartment in the first Rotating Skyscraper’.²¹ No matter if the building is not yet finished, barely commenced or even not fully designed, prospective buyers of virtual real estate have been encouraged to ‘grow with the dream’.²²

PICTURE 11.

Dubai – its area, situation and most prominent hallmarks.



As the distinction between fantasy and reality becomes ever more confusing, one realizes that this is the undeclared aim of

²⁰ <http://www.designboom.com/contemporary/dubai1.html> 2008-10-13

²¹ <http://www.dynamicarchitecture.net/home.html> 2008-10-13

²² Advertising slogan, Harrods Department Store, London, UK, 2006.

the developers and constructors of Dubai. In order to sell the image of exclusivity and extravagance to business and tourism investors the link between what is already there, and what might be there in the future, has to be as seamless as possible. As George Katodrytis reveals;

Contemporary culture is led and powered by digital imaging technology, which has transformed the way we visualize and see the world. Architects are now equipped with enhanced tools of dreaming. And as these imaging tools become more sophisticated, the line²³ between the imaginary and the real is increasingly blurred.

In addition, the distinction between the natural and the constructed also becomes unclear. Katodrytis points out that Dubai's natural beachfront is 45 kilometres long but artificial islands will add another 1,500 kilometres to this figure, 'turning the coastline and the city into an inexhaustible holiday resort'.²⁴ Cultural sensitivities are also at stake here. A recent 2008 International Architects Conference, held in Abu Dhabi, was reported under the headline 'Architects call for Emirati designs', whereby some participants questioned building styles in the Emirates, arguing that the profusion of images has been created without sufficient reference to local culture, being determined and outsourced outside the Middle East.²⁵

DEMARCATED LIVES

On the ground today, the distinctions between the water-based heritage of the old city and the newer sprawling globalopolis being constructed to the west are growing ever starker. Many of the city's attention seeking 'hot spots' have been situated along the growth corridor which follows the Sheikh Zayed

²³ Katodrytis, G. (2007) *Metropolitan Dubai and the Rise of Architectural Fantasy* accessed at <http://www.radicalurbantheory.com/misc/dubai.html> 2008-10-14

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ "Architects call for Emirati designs", *The National*, 22 April 2008.

Road, linking the old city to the coastal resort of Jumeirah, and thence to the new industrial centre and port complex at Jebel Ali, some 35 kilometres to the south-west. A new focus for development along this axis will be the Dubai Marina, billed to be the world's largest man-made marina and projected home to some 200 high-rise buildings. The declared vision;

...is to create an awe-inspiring city-within-a city that delights residents with its cosmopolitan, free-spirited atmosphere and unique, invigorating lifestyle. It will be an urban centre on the water, comparable to the most exclusive waterfront developments in the world's leading cities.'²⁶

PICTURE 12.
Workers, workers, workers... building a lighthouse in the Marina.



Close to the marina are to be other 'cities within the city' such as Dubai Internet City, Dubai Media City, Dubai Sports City and the American University of Dubai, offering dedicated hubs for specialised services. In Dubai, however, Daniel Burnham's dictum 'make no little plans' is followed to the letter. The Dubai-based Nakheel Corporation has slated plans for the

²⁶ Hoyland, R. G. (2001) *Arabia and the Arabs* Routledge, London & New York, pp. 13-14.

largest man-made development in the world, the ultimate ‘city within a city’, simply termed ‘The Waterfront’, and planned for the coast south of Jebel Ali. This conglomeration of canals and artificial islands, designed to ultimately house 1.5 million people, will occupy the last remaining undeveloped stretch of Dubai’s shoreline.²⁷

Yet, beyond the exclusivity and extravagance of Dubai’s hot spots, this growth corridor resembles many of the sprawling automobile-dependent cities of the USA, with growing traffic congestion and parking problems. The legal entitlement of Emiri nationals to a plot of land, combined with the provision of interest-free building loans and the availability of cheap oil, has stimulated suburbanisation and the creation of dormitory communities.²⁸ Many of the city’s foreign workers, making up some 83 per cent of total population, have been housed in standard housing units and apartments, many of which are located in older more run-down parts of the city. At the bottom of the housing ladder, large numbers of migrant labourers are crowded into bleak work camps situated on the city’s outskirts, and ‘crowded six, eight, even twelve to a room, often without air-conditioning or functioning toilets’.²⁹ The irony of this situation, not uncommon in the midst of futuristic construction projects,³⁰ is that the rightful architects of the city are denied access to the convenience and comforts that they themselves have toiled to build. Michael Pacione, writing in 2005, warns that;

²⁷ <http://archrecord.construction.com/news/daily/archives/080312koolhaas.asp> 2008-10-15

²⁸ Pacione, M. (2005) “City Profile: Dubai”, *Cities* Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 255-265.

²⁹ Davies, M. (2006) “Fear and Money in Dubai”, *New Left Review* 41, September-October 2006 accessed at <http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2635> 2008-10-15

³⁰ Holston, J. (1989) *The Modernist City: an Anthropological Critique of Brasilia* University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Highly visible income and lifestyle differences between affluent and poorer residents and socio-spatial polarisation between national and low-income non-national workers may require that, in future, greater consideration be directed to the distribution of wealth as well as to wealth creation.³¹

Recent work on the nature of socioeconomic inequalities has revealed the importance of maintaining ‘equalness’ within society in order to avoid the destructive patterns of behaviour that plague more deeply divided societies.³² Cities characterized by deep socioeconomic inequalities would be less attractive to investment capital, thus undermining their ability to maintain their competitiveness.³³

Within Dubai such inequalities manifest themselves in the creation and control of space. Privatized spaces best exemplified by enclosed shopping malls designed as temples of conspicuous consumption, have removed ‘topographic public space’ from a society where ‘procedural public space’³⁴ is subject to a number of political and cultural constraints. The gap between the hyper-affluent and the remainder in Dubai is reinforced by spatial demarcation. There is no prospect of staying at the Burj Al Arab, or even wandering through its Arabian fantasy interior, as casual visitors are strictly monitored at the entrance to the hotel’s private causeway. Precious few will be able to afford ‘a lifetime of exclusive vacations’ as offered by the Royal Club, less still the US\$4,850,000 price tag for 116.5 square metres on the 13th floor of the Burj Dubai Armani Hotel Apartment.³⁵ Consequently, even the wealthy appear as also-rans in the context of Dubai’s billion-dollar projects. While

³¹ Pacione, M., op cit. p. 265.

³² Wilkinson, R. & Pickett, K. (2009) *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* Penguin Books.

³³ Marcuse, P. & van Kempen, R. (eds.) (2000) *Globalizing Cities: A new spatial order?* London: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

³⁴ Iveson, K. (2009) *Publics and the City* Blackwell, Oxford.

³⁵ <http://burjdubaiskyscraper.com/property.html> 2008-10-17

international tourism has always been characterised by a ‘haves and have-nots’ divide, in Dubai exclusivity has been made virtually impenetrable through extravagant construction methods, planted islands and ever taller towers, which mimic mediaeval motte and bailey, complete with attendant drawbridges.

DURABILITY AMIDST DEPRESSION

The onset of the global financial crisis, which intensified during September 2008, has undermined the most heavily indebted economies, and within the Gulf region Dubai’s ‘mounting international debt load’ has attracted attention.³⁶ On 22 September the Emirates Central Bank responded to the crisis making US\$13.6 Billion available to ease credit problems.³⁷ Here the leadership role played by the UAE’s wealthiest emirate Abu Dhabi, with its massive oil revenues and small debt base, is quite critical. Nevertheless, Dubai’s ‘visitor economy’ would not be spared from the impacts of a global recession with failing investment banks, falling oil prices, reduced tourism revenues and mounting unemployment in the world’s major economies.

³⁶ <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/business/story/0,28124,24478624-36375,00.html> 2008-10-22

³⁷ http://www.telegraphindia.com/1081006/jsp/foreign/story_9932689.jsp 2008-10-22

PICTURE 13.
The Palm Jumeirah with the ‘Atlantis’ viewed from the 44th floor. Observe the scale of the buildings!



The first casualties of a global recession are likely to be the unfinanced blueprints and tentative agreements relating to the most expansive, expensive and extravagant projects. Furthermore, Dubai could be blighted by the sight of high rise towers and marine platforms marooned in a state of partial completion. Many of Dubai’s guest workers have recently been compelled to return home, exacerbating economic and social problems within the wider region. A slump in global tourism could expose the excessive levels of infrastructure capacity, particularly in regard to airport provision, existing in Dubai and neighbouring UAE states. Most obviously, if economic chaos is followed by political and social upheaval, there is the threat to the stability of the UAE which, so far, has been spared the worst excesses of Islamic militancy. During the boom period Dubai’s

ruling family has maintained a delicate balance between traditional identity and commercial openness, it remains to be seen if this can be achieved during a period of relative decline.

PICTURE 14.

Arriving to the mainland from Palm Jumeirah, a sign: “Bathe in tranquility”... A forest of skyscrapers in the background – the areas around the Marina.



In a time of global economic instability and environmental concern, Dubai's ostentatious building projects would seem to be the antithesis of earth-friendly, economically accountable and socially inclusive constructions, given their excessive reliance upon air conditioning, desalinated water supplies and exclusive planning. *Earth Trends*, published by the World Resources Institute, placed the UAE in 110th place on its 2005 Environmental Sustainability Index (ESI), and 112th of 149

countries on its Environmental Performance Index (EPI).³⁸ While there are logistical problems involved in the compilation of such indices, the low rankings of the UAE go against the obvious national correlations between performance and GNP per capita, a situation which should give the oil-rich states cause for concern. Another critical assessment by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF 2007), reported the UAE as having the world's largest per capita 'ecological footprint', surpassing even the USA in its profligacy.³⁹

Moderating UAE's extreme heat entails high levels of energy use and emissions are spread among a relatively small population, but such bad publicity undermines the constant stream of positive promotional material emanating from the region.

PICTURE 15.

Worker's gone leaving the shoes behind...



³⁸ ESI website http://sedac.ciesin.columbia.edu/es/esi/b_countryprofiles.pdf and EPI website http://sedac.ciesin.columbia.edu/es/epi/papers/2008EPI_rankingsandscores_23Jan08.pdf accessed 2008-10-21

³⁹ <http://www.climateark.org/shared/reader/welcome.aspx?linkid=66960&keybold=solar%20desert%20wildlife> 2008-10-21

Certainly the backers and builders of Dubai are concerned about their environmental image but construction to date has moved well away from the environmentally responsive wind towers of the past. Looking at other aspects of environmental sustainability, the multitude of decisions taken to substantially modify the length, shape and size of Dubai's coastline through the construction of low rise islands and spectacular marinas, would seem to be extremely courageous in the light of global concerns over rising sea level. While the shallow protected Gulf waters are not likely to experience violent *tsunami* activity, there is a threat posed by increased storm surges which, at the very least, could necessitate the construction of higher and potentially unsightly breakwaters.

International deliberations, most notably the 1992 Rio and 2002 Johannesburg 'Earth Summits', the 1996 Istanbul Habitat II conference which addressed the issue of sustainable human settlements, and World Urban Forums at Nairobi 2002, Barcelona 2004, Vancouver 2006 and Nanjing 2008, have debated critical urban issues and deliberated on policy prescriptions.⁴⁰ While attention has focused upon the 'three pillars' of environmental, economic and cultural/social sustainability which make up the 'triple bottom line'.⁴¹ Swedish planners have recently stressed four starting points for city planning, these being; the provision of an area of free economy, maintaining an everyday milieu for most inhabitants, an emphasis on heritage retention, and as a place which creates and consumes resources. The opportunities to achieve balance between economic, social, technological and ecological sustainability increase when the city is planned with regard to

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* <http://www.unhabitat.org/content.asp?cid=4613&catid=535&typeid=24&subMenuId=0> 2008-10-20

⁴¹ Wong, Tai-chee, Shaw, B. J. and Goh, Kim-chuan (eds.) (2006) *Challenging Sustainability: Urban Development and Change in Southeast Asia* Marshall Cavendish, Singapore.

these four principles.⁴² If Dubai can claim adherence to free market conditions and most certainly participates in the creation and consumption of resources the two remaining points still demand further attention. Public space provision, particular in the creation of 'common spaces' and reconnections to aspects of officially recognised maritime heritage, would result from a greater awareness of 'bottom-up' elements in the planning process allowing greater recognition of Dubai's cultural diversity.

Such questions relate more broadly to the successful building and planning of all contemporary global cities in the context of human, sustainable development, in order to promote an agreeable quality of life for all residents.

⁴² Ullstad, E. (2008) *Hållbar stadsutveckling*. Swedish Association of Architects. Stockholm, p. 14-15.