

Case Study Dubai
or learning from Junk Space Deluxe
Boris Brorman Jensen

VERB > The previous pages featured some of the forces and effects that are not only defining Dubai, but also redefining the world atlas. Boris Brorman Jensen's study of the city (part of a series of investigations that include the transformation of Bangkok and of Astana, Kazakhstan, which the author terms the "Absurdistan Case"), reveals the most evident manifestation of the amalgam of tourism, entertainment, and real estate in what he describes as the "dynamics of bingo urbanism." In this latter-day metropolis, where conventional understandings of the city have been exchanged for a topography of excess, we are left wondering about the character of the opportunities that Dubai presents.

Within the past few decades, a series of Arabic *SimCities* with infrastructural overcapacity, little or no taxation, and low crime rates have developed into parade grounds for the economic dynamics of the post-industrial society, and have come to represent a unique growth environment for a brand-new type of global urban development. These cities manifest themselves first and foremost as "hyperconcentrations of the infrastructure to house the corporate headquarters, financial management and variety of specialist business services which spring up. They also develop a significant cultural sector with entertainment districts and cultural tourist sites to provide the meeting places with the necessary ambience for deals to be enacted."¹ Several of these new city-states on the Arab Peninsula have been characterised by the almost total absence of material resistance from existing societal structures and as a result have the greatest flexibility in relation to globalisation's external patterns of transnational capital movement.

Dubai, the second largest sheikdom in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), is the one of the wealthy Arab pocket states that has been most successful in resaddling from the unilateral utilisation of oil to an advanced post-industrial economy. Over three decades this desert area, measuring roughly four thousand square kilometres, has developed from a small trading station under British

¹ Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash, eds., *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World* (London: Sage, 1999), p. 6.





protectorate to a city-state of roughly 1.3 million inhabitants with one of the world's fastest growing economies. Less than 10% of Dubai's gross national product is directly based on oil production, and one of the main reasons for this formidable shift in economics is without a doubt the enormous investments over recent decades that have fertilised Dubai's desert surface with infrastructure and other site development projects.² Since independence at the beginning of the 70's, the UAE have spent US \$225 billion on expanding this infrastructure: "Oil wealth has been able to give Dubai, and the whole of the UAE, the most advanced and sophisticated infrastructure in the world."³

Eight-lane motorways linking regular clover-shaped distribution centres run through the desert of Dubai and divide almost desolate areas into strategic plots. Enormous power plants with pipelines connected directly to the oil wells send vibrating energy grade lines towards the horizon. Desalination plants with widely branched distribution systems alongside modern communication technologies form an open plan structure of technological fertility along the Persian Gulf. Together with a rapidly increasing number of spectacular high-profile projects and landmarks such as luxury hotels, offshore holiday resorts, extravagant golf courses, governmental offices and financial Towers of Babel, infrastructure is the very foundation on which the city makes its base, not just physically and functionally, but also very much as a unifying narrative.

Like most contemporary cities, Dubai is not defined by a clear demarcation line between productive and unproductive, between culture and nature, between built-up areas and open landscape. As in most generic cities, the boundaries of urban culture are both internal and external. In Dubai, the desert is everywhere—inside, between, and around urban developments. What defines present-day culture and marks a boundary is the limit of its infrastructure. East of the outer motorway is where the territory of Hummer expeditions and the "old Bedouin age" begins. Infrastructure is the foundation of this desert state. It shapes the very contours of the civilisation behind its formation and is, therefore, the object of an indigenous ornamental culture. The pockets of inaccessible landscape fragments that are a consequence of the large motorway intersections and roundabouts are not just downsides, meaningless distributional spaces, or logistical marks in the sand; they func-

2 "With the ambitious Maktoum family at the helm, billions of petro-dollars have been invested in the development of an infrastructure which has transformed Dubai into a regional capital for leisure and sport, commerce and trade re-export, exhibitions and conferences, as well as a global aviation hub and the

world's fastest growing tourist destination." *Dubai International Airport Yearbook and Directory 2002/03*, p. 8.

3 According to *Gulf News* online edition, Nov. 11, 2001 and Jan. 29, 2002 (accessed 02-06-2005).

tion as quasi-parks and oases of botanical clusters in the midst of one of the world's most infertile areas.

Seen in contrast to the all-encompassing and constant drought, these enclaves of realised mirages appear to be both convenient centres of orientation and strategic statements. The ritualistic maintenance of all the residual areas around the larger roads along with the enormous sums that are spent on irrigation of infrastructural SLOIP⁴ have turned a term formerly referring to waste and exclusion into the most likely candidate for a new key player in the struggle to define a postmodern public domain. Pivotal points of the road system are monumentalised with apolitical artefacts, which, at a formal distance to the political reality, far exceed the abstraction of "Western" modernism's democratic sculptures. A 30 to 40 foot tall coffee set, a gigantic clock with built-in fountain, and different synthetic natural scenarios adorn nexuses of a city-state that has its roots in mobility and celebrate a seemingly random, but nonetheless collective, narrative.

If the road system were merely intended as a physical form of conveyance and a basic necessity for economical circulation, the embedded codes and the epos of mobility, which the cultivation of all residual landscapes⁵ illustrates, would not just be a meta-structure of waste of heroic dimensions, but altogether meaningless. Modern Dubai is not the result of an accumulative culture; its source of origin eroded in the desert sands long ago, and its material history cannot be written as a progressive crossing of thresholds. Naturally, the pivotal points of the traffic network are the crown jewels of the state-owned investment project, but they are also the dynamic spaces that best bear witness to the abrupt process which characterises Dubai's cultural and economic development.

And why should *Autopia* not have its own monuments, when the motorway system of a freeway culture is, as noted by American architectural historian Reyner Banham, already a place with its own consistency and conceptual coherence?⁶ The roundabout and the motorway intersection's monuments of transition may be to the postmodern city what the triumphal arch and the city wall were to the concentric city. These regular plots of land and sites for development between corridors of transport and communica-



4 "SLOIP" is Lionel Brett's acronym for "Space Left Over In Planning." See Brett, *Parameters and Images: Architecture in a Crowded World* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970).

5 The areas are residual landscapes in a twofold sense. Firstly because they constitute a residue in terms of planning areas, and secondly

because they are employed as dumping sites for the surplus residue of sludge from the wastewater treatment plants.

6 Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001 [1971]), p. 195.

tion are separated into a rational sector system, where a numeric code indicates the physical location of the area, its intended utilisation and its placement in the economy; for example, sector 221 to 224 (Dubai International Airport), sector 252 (Mushrif Park), sector 251 (Mirdif Housing Area), sector 364-365 (Al Quoz Industrial Area), sub-sector 64 (reserved for protection of the natural environment), etc.

Urbanised Dubai comprises a rectangular system measuring roughly 500 square kilometres of more or less scattered built-up areas, which run along the coast from the frontier with neighbouring state Sharjah in the north to Jebel Ali Harbour in the south. No original city centre can effectively be said to exist. The majority of the old buildings have been demolished long ago, but the street structure around the tidal inlet Dubai Creek, which divides the old harbour area into two separate districts, Bur Dubai and Deira, has retained part of its concentric structure and has become a loose knot in an organic grid structure of north/south bound arteries and east/westbound connecting roads. Quite a bit of scattered urban development takes place; old buildings are demolished to make space for new ones and empty spaces are filled. However, primary growth takes place, unsurprisingly, within those areas left untouched by the infrastructural system, which despite a calculated overcapacity nevertheless requires regular expansion in order to absorb the increasing growth. In Al Barshaa and Al Sufouh in the free trade zone to the south, large billboards and numerous construction cranes bear witness to ongoing development, which soon will cause a local bottleneck in the system.

There has been an attempt to organise Dubai's urban development according to something that resembles a traditional modern ideal. This involved clear zoning and a rational organisation of production in a finely woven network of mobility, which work according to a kind of *fuzzy functionalism* rather than Fordism's principle of assembly line order.⁷ In spite of clear planning into patterns comprising monofunctional areas and the overall rectangular systems, the culture of construction that has emerged does not behave according to any known ideal. Clearly, the scattered structure of growth oases does not match the concentric model, nor does it call to mind anything that can be traced back to the earlier autonomous enclaves of known polycentric conurbations.

7 "Fuzzy logic" describes propositions handling a weak logic which is neither true nor false. Fuzzy or weak logic is used to control programmes dealing with unique processes (for example, in advanced washing machines) which can not be contained within the framework of scientific management. "Fuzzy functionalism" could be used as a metaphor

to describe the highly rational, and at the same time eccentric, planning schemes used in Dubai.



Neither is this situation controlled by the formalistic principle of dispersion, which ribbon development immediately simulates. Dubai has a backbone of development along the coast, but all modern programmes such as business parks, financial headquarters, residential enclaves, shopping centres, tourist destinations, fun and recreational landscapes, which make up the greater part of urban growth, are too scattered to form a recognisable territorial pattern, and the single units are too solitary to form unitary connections. The city is a fragmented, post-polycentric environment held together by technologies with their base in mobility, whose general layout is a "French landscape," but whose local organisation complies with an "English garden plan," and whose economic dynamic is globally oriented.

On many points, this combination of rational structure, autonomous internal organisation and external growth conditions makes Dubai a good representative for what California geographers Michael Dear and Steven Flusty have labeled "keno capitalism."⁸ The overall system of infrastructures that mechanistically divides the uniform desert landscape into numbered units, just like a bingo game board, and the incoherent pattern of private development projects descending from above, like pieces that have been drawn in some external investment game with no relations of physical proximity, make the image of "the city as gaming board seem an especially appropriate twenty-first century successor to the concentrically ringed city of the early twentieth century."⁹ With globalisation, Dubai has become a pioneer for this kind of "bingo urbanism"—a mosaic of monocultures in a field of business opportunities.

The Expo-isation of the City

Today, Dubai's social infrastructure is split up into different functions and units, where tasks are undertaken by operators in a market driven by competition. The entrepreneurial display of desalination plants and sewage systems, which were synonymous with Dubai's institutions in the first consolidation phase, has taken on a much more diverse character both economically, functionally and aesthetically. With the booming of the globalized economy, Dubai has become a kind of world's fair: a colos-

8 Michael Dear and Steven Flusty, "The Post-modern Urban Condition," in Featherstone and Lash, *Spaces of Culture*, p. 77.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

sal Expo where several of the participating entrepreneurs have themselves become corporate micro-nations, competing against each other in the global market with regard to transportation systems, waste disposal, security, communication technologies, finance, insurance, cleaning, theme parks, hotels, holiday resorts, luxury buildings, shopping centres, and all the other components that form part of a post-modern society.¹⁰ Just like the real Expo, Dubai has become a home to extravagant architecture from all over the world, a gated utopia full of people of all nationalities working or having fun for a period. This Expo-isation is much more multifaceted than the traditional world fair, and its organisation is more complex, but otherwise there is a striking similarity. In short, Dubai as a phantasmagorical picture is no longer a framed narrative, but a fiction used actively to create history.¹¹

The majority of Dubai's "population" are expatriates with no formal political influence, so civil rights are more or less reduced to work, security and consumption. And this cosmo-cultural security state has no common ritual calendar; it has relative religious freedom, because neo-liberalism to a large extent overrules clericalism, and people thus tend to their own Gods, while bowing to an economical cycle that operates as a permanent fun fest. All shopping days are holy days in the calendar of the shopping centre. In this connection, Expo-isation functions as a common aesthetic basis for different expressions of lifestyle and habits of consumption, and the theatrical language which is mechanically iterated by Dubai's inflated generic architecture has become the vernacular expression of the global space. The interconnected network of cities favoured by the new global economy establishes bridgeheads to tax havens, but is also made attractive by the unique combination of booming sales and entertainment extravaganza which is institutionalised by the Expo. The layout of this experience economy, or "funscape," is a significant factor for localised planning of the global flow of money, and has therefore become an important strategic parameter in urban development. The multinational companies that establish their market stalls in Dubai do not pay tax, but their display of a transnational elite, glamorous on the golf course and enviable in its absolute consumer freedom, is extremely profitable business in itself. This wonderland of wealth has become one of the tourist industry's new raw materials, and the entry fee is one of the Expo-ised city's

10 Globalisation's tendentious dissolution of the nation state mirrors the tendency of international companies to nominate themselves as habitats or micro-nations for certain lifestyles. Dear and Flusty, pp. 64–85.

11 See Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).



most important sources of income. According to the Ministry of Tourism, 25% of Dubai's GNP today derives directly or indirectly from tourism, and there are no signs that this percentage will decrease.¹² The expected number of visitors will, according to the airport authorities, increase from the present 15 million to 45 million a year within the next three decades.¹³

The Expo's thematic organisation of space in expressive and introverted monoliths is, moreover, a principle of order that can assemble the various programmes and, to a certain degree, control bingo urbanism's random pattern of expansion. In contrast to an actual Expo, Dubai is not arranged around national pavilions but established in territorially independent functioning units, which are grouped as miniature cities. The past, for example, is exhibited in The Heritage Village, the Diving City and the Al Boom Tourist Village. Entertainment and events are regarded as a world order and are, therefore, to be found in Dubai Land, Dubai Festival City, Children's City, Wonderland, and Global Village. Fun-shopping is in Wafi City and Deira City Centre. Communication, knowledge and technology can be encountered in Dubai Internet City, Knowledge Village and Dubai Media City. The financial city booms in World Trade Center and along Sheik Zayed Road. Exclusive accommodation, yachting and golf are united in Emirates Hills ("Residential golf course estate"), The Lakes ("A professionally planned residential gated community"), The Meadows ("EMAAR's premium villa project"), and Dubai Marina ("The world's largest master planned waterfront development of its kind"). Meditative retreats and "Lush Landscapes" lie side by side in Creek Side Park, Safa Park and Mushrif Park.

The most significant alteration to this global post-industrial city state may be the introduction of the extensive enclaving that defines the Expo's places, coordinates the heterogeneity of space, and keeps the architectonic elements apart. This Expo-isation, which has split Dubai's urban space into a solitary typology and into class enclaves, has an afterglow of re-feudalisation, and therefore exceeds a polycentric urban fragmentation in which each enclave as a decentralised unit contains a narrative of totality. Although Dubai's post-polycentric urban pattern is generally woven together by infrastructure and exclusively differentiated by

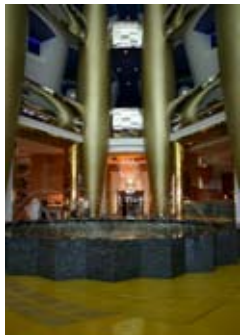
12 "With its oil resources running out, Dubai, part of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has launched a multi-billion dollar tourism drive in an effort to establish itself as the Gulf's leisure hub." <http://www.dubaicityguide.com/specials/palmisland.htm> (accessed Jan. 29, 2003).

13 According to Dubai International Airport's website at <http://www.dubaiairport.com/> (accessed Feb. 2003). The number includes transit passengers, which makes the airport the world's sixth fastest growing and at the same time Dubai's most important shopping centre.

Expo-isation, the representation of the city as material culture has no indexical picture to refer to.

Like the hypertext, this elusive epic has no unifying principle. There is no stylistic discrepancy between, for example, the Egypt-inspired entrance of the Wafi shopping centre and the adjacent High-Tech residential tower. The stories are coordinated, and postmodern citation has emancipated the continuity of history and pluralized the semantic logic of urban space. A filtration must take place if the contours of the germinating information society are to be differentiated from the sea of SPAM that blurs the distinction. The narratives of Dubai—for lack of a coherent theory to plot it with—must therefore be traced as a number of points of impact, or oases of evidence, in this cultural desert space.

Dubai is an extreme example of globalisation's significance to the city. It might be hoped, however, that the concepts presented here—bingo urbanism, EXPO-isation, The City of the Image, Genius Logo, wonder sprawl—can be utilised as spatial, cultural and political fragments for understanding, mapping and analysing the contemporary city increasingly affected by the forces of globalisation.



Burj Al Arab: The City of the Image

One of Dubai's most well known landmarks, and one of the Expo-state's more extraordinary "trademarks," is undoubtedly the 321 meter tall luxury hotel Burj Al Arab, placed on a man-made island approximately 300 metres off the coast of Jumeirah in the southern urbanised area. The hotel represents the extravagance that the tourist ministry eagerly identifies as the true essence of Dubai. This monument is promoted in different brochures, not only as a point of reference for Dubai, but as "a universal symbol of the new millennium." Like the Eiffel Tower, the hotel has an exterior skeleton that makes the building completely open internally. The balconies of the 202 duplex suites face inwards and form a 180 meter high lobby, wrapped in a filigree pattern of gilded ornamentation straight out of the Arabian Nights. The introverted culmination of the monument is effectively sealed from its surroundings. Apart from sunlight, only very big spenders,

celebrities and other heroes of consumption can occupy this tower of wealth. If the empty interior of the Eiffel Tower was the swan song of robustness, then the cavity of Burj Al Arab is the apotheosis of the atrium.



$$\text{The Palm} = (\text{▲} \text{▲} \text{▲} \text{▲} \text{▲})^2$$

The seven star hotel is neither the tallest nor the most expensive structure and not even half as phallic as SOM's Burj Dubai, but has some sophisticated references to its archetype in Paris and is therefore the Expo-city's most vigorous landmark. "The Arab Tower's" over-dimensional delicacy and the Teflon-coated, fibre-glass reinforced screen of the façade bear witness to the "frontier" of contemporary engineering, just as the Eiffel Tower exposed the daring constructions of its time. In much the same way as Eiffel displaced the bourgeois salon up into the skies by placing a restaurant on top of the old monument, so the English engineering firm of WS Atkins has elevated the bar and the jet-set beach party to a height from which the world seems more inviting. The compositional crowning glory is the helicopter deck, which faces in towards the shore and marks the acme of this society, based as it is on mobility. What the observation pavilion of the Eiffel Tower provided for the general public, the Burj Al Arab provides for the international elite. Where the Eiffel Tower, metaphorically, was a triumphal arch that made it possible for industrialism to look down over the city of the past, Burj Al Arab is an emblem of the global elite's luxury paradise.

Palm Islands

Just as the opulent luxury of the Burj Al Arab hotel transcends the scale of gradation for luxury hotels, so has it expanded Kevin Lynch's cognitive parameters of urban mapping in the automobile age.¹⁴ Dubai has invented the Benchmark or something like a "Great Branding Reef strategy:" private investors are in the process of building a series artificial islands in the sea between the harbour area, Jebel Ali, and the urban area, Jumeirah. The Palm Islands projects will be shaped as conventionalised palm tree silhouettes, and they will be large enough to form the foundation of a brand-new affluent society in the middle of the Arabian Gulf.

¹⁴ Namely, edge, node, path, landmark and district. See Kevin Lynch, *The Image of The City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960).

The Palm, Jumeirah and The Palm, Jebel Ali as the projects are called, will, when they are completed, expand Dubai's coastline by 166% and cover approximately 60 km² in area. They will boast 100 luxury hotels, 5000 exclusive beach-front houses, 3600 coastal apartments, four marinas, water parks, theme parks, innumerable restaurants, shopping centres, sport facilities, health spas, and cinemas. Each palm is compositionally divided into a trunk, consisting of a 300 meter-long suspension bridge to the mainland, which is accessible to the public, a privately gated crown as the centre, and an atoll formation in the shape of a half-moon with holiday hotels as its outer boundary.

By virtue of its extent and its urban qualities, The Palm is more than just an accretion on the existing city. The project has become the definitive icon of isolationistic urban development, because it has been so successful in its withdrawal from the existing urban landscape. The glamorous island has become a world-famous brand for luxury life, and as such has won the prestigious "American Corporate Identity Award" even before it has been completed.

Al Bastakiya District: Improving the Past

Just as Dubai's future taking shape at a rapid rate, the city's past is also in a process of radical change. EMAAR properties—the very same company that is building a handful of new golf communities and luxury enclaves in the Jumeirah district—is restoring and rebuilding the "old" Dubai around the tidal inlet's southern bank in Bur Dubai. From the Al Fahidi roundabout in the east and nearly 1000 metres to the west, there will, in a few years time, be a brand-new and historically transformed urban area consisting of the Al Bastakiya and Al Souk Kabeer districts, with several historical fragments of isolated buildings and smaller built-up sections scattered over a large area and hidden between modern developments. As the name implies, there is a souk in the area, but also a museum of ancient history and a small cluster of traditional buildings known as "bastakiya," erected in coral stone and constructed around a confined courtyard, with characteristic cooling wind towers sticking out over their flat roofs.

A predetermined route through the area is the main control mechanism which, in the future, will tie the districts to the narrative of the city—"particularly those areas which are relatively unchanged by the fast pace of development."¹⁵ The trip, which takes the visitor through the 16 most important points in the thematically bound narrative of the city's history, is estimated to last two hours. Following the itinerary, one is guided westward with pauses at strategic places: the "Ruler's Office"—the so-called Diwan—opposite the eastern entrance of the museum (the building is from 1990 but is built in old style with majestic cooling towers); Al Taleb Street, past the textile souk and further westward to a promenade that runs along the inlet; Shaikh Saeed, Al Maktoum's former residence in Al Shindanga, far enough away from the first sights that the connection to "the old" Dubai is primarily the stuff of narrative.



Dubai Festival City: Jon Jerde Was Here

Where planning used to assume that life could be moulded through the control of space, now it is apparently space that, more or less, controls the market's organisation of life as style. Jon Jerde, the architect behind the Dubai Festival City urban development project, expresses this paradigmatic twist in the social grammar of architecture: "Our curves are not formal, but perceptual; they are used to draw people in."¹⁶ In much the same way as optical illusions and anamorphoses of the baroque era attempted to burst the physical limits of space by capturing the attention of the spectator from a specific position, so urban space is now controlled by a script that directs consumers around a constantly expanding consumption. Dubai Festival City is organised like a story: Jerde calls this a "scripted space", and even the name Dubai Festival City underlines the festivalisation of the city: "'The Disneyland effect' has entered our language, to remind us that hypertrophied mall 'cities' have become essential to globalized tourism."¹⁷

This new city-in-the-city will consist of 15 different districts that broadly cover different target groups, mapped out through market research. The plan itself is shaped like a tadpole. A 55-storey tower constitutes the landmark of Festival City and turns the



¹⁵ *Dubai Townwalk Explorer* (Dubai: Explorer Publishing, 2000).

¹⁶ Jon Jerde, quoted in Frances Anderton, *et. al.*, *You Are Here* (London: Phaidon, 1999), p. 198.

¹⁷ Norman Klein, *Op. cit.* p. 113. Hypertrophy is the medical designation of the abnormal enlargement of an organ.



main orientation of the development westwards; a tail attached to the tower is comprised of stepped buildings whose winding curves suggest the maritime theme of “waterfront development.” Once it is completed, this US\$4 billion development will be the largest “mixed-use real estate project” in the Middle East. All of the flats and hotel rooms are plugged directly into the airport, whose air space forms the physical portal of the development. Festival City is a consumption community: the inhabitants are customers, the city is a store, and the recreational facilities form part of the development plan as effective production facilities.

Dubai Festival City is not bound to place as an expression of the idea of genius loci; if anything, it has its origins in what could be called the theory of Genius Logo: town planning as media strategy. The plan is a brand, a loyal double of the project’s logo: “The logo reflects the dynamism of Dubai Festival City and will assist in establishing its image with its local, regional and international audiences.”¹⁸

Dubai Shopping Festival: Entertainment Extravaganza

Besides being the originators of Dubai Festival City, Al-Fut-taim Investments is also one of the main sponsors behind Dubai Shopping Festival, which has been the biggest “retail cum entertainment extravaganza” performance in Dubai since 1996. The festival, whose temporary headquarters, Global Village Dubai, is located within the Dubai Festival City area, takes place at the beginning of the spring and is an extraordinary initiative in the middle of the off-season period.

Global Village Dubai consists of different “international” pavilions that represent the event’s leading actors and, at the same time, are a frame of reference for the territories that the producers wish to portray as their domiciles. It also stabilises the different festivities— as centre-less as the city itself—through the use of a variety of effects to attract mass attention, such as fireworks, music, food from all parts of the world, souvenirs, and lavish opening ceremonies. During the festival the city is also invaded by different fictive characters from the fairy-tale world: plastic dolls, smiling inflatable balloon faces, and itinerant costumes from Dis-

¹⁸ http://www.afwebadmin.com/futtainwatches/new/details_press.asp?id=860 (accessed Jan. 15, 2003).



neyland that, typically, could be Aladdin, and almost always without exception include Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, who guest perform in the city’s parks and shopping centres in order to make the festival an even more fantastic experience.

In 2002, a wide range of arrangements was held under the sub-theme “One World, One Family, One Festival:” among others, the Dubai World Cup horse race, UEA World Cup “Endurance marathon,” “Ideal Arab Mother and Family Awards,” the golf tournament “Dubai Desert Classic,” the Family Fun phenomenon “Safe City,” a sand sculpture show, a wedding costume exhibition, various motor stunt shows and, last but not least, the “Hamdan bin Rashid Al Maktoum Award for Distinguished Academic Performance.” Most of the larger theme parks are involved in the festivities in much the same way as the shopping centres, which are incorporated as the projected arenas of the festival; but the space outside the commercial hotspots is also involved. In connection with the festival, several of the main arterial roads are assigned themes, which are supposed to transform the street space into outdoor galleries of artistic shows, sports activities and other “family-related” performances. In 2002 more than 2.5 million shoppers from all parts of the world participated in the performance of this urban event.

Wafi City: The Shopping City

Wafi City is located in the Bur Dubai area south of the inlet, some hundred metres from Al Garhoud Bridge and the future Dubai Festival City (DFC). Like DFC, Wafi City is an amalgam of living quarters, recreational and entertainment programmes. In spite of their urban names, however, sites like Wafi City, Deira City Center, and Lamcy Plaza are all privately owned shopping centres. While their distribution and locations borrow from the image of the “old” city, the spatial organisation of their interiors are without exception derived from the shopping streets and market places of the industrial metropolis. Furthermore, with these new mall conglomerates, the marketplace, the entertainment industry and the private housing market have been embodied into the same private sphere: “Wafi City... a whole new destination within one boundary.”¹⁹ What previously was separated function-

¹⁹ <http://www.waficity.com/insight/index.htm> (accessed 19.03.2003)

ally has now been brought together, and what once lay scattered as parcels of private enterprise in public space is now lumped together around a new domain, which is neither private nor public in the classical sense.

Wafi City also publishes its own magazine, *Insight*—“The magazine from Wafi City that captures the essence of the good life.”²⁰ The magazine is most closely related to examples like Benetton’s *Colors*, which is neither a traditional advertisement nor an independent lifestyle magazine but a sort of hybrid. Printed in 25,000 copies twice a month, *Insight* is a tactical expansion of the contextual framework of the consumption location. The magazine is concerned with the products and lifestyles that Wafi City has defined as its potential market segment, both exemplifying how the battle for the new consumption public’s virtual territory is being fought and demonstrating, in its discourse, an awareness of the cultural displacement of ‘the state of things’ that is at stake here. As MKM Marketing claims, “*Insight* means ‘having the ability to see the inner nature of the hidden depths of things’—which is what *Insight* magazine is all about.”²¹

Dubai Golf: Wonder-Sprawl

On top of the hierarchy of the desert state’s green enclaves are the golf courses, and the cherries on the cake in Dubai are undoubtedly the two full 18-hole courses of Dubai Creek Golf and Emirates Golf Club. With its contours in the shape of a fully rigged sail and prominent location at the waterfront of the inner harbour, the clubhouse of Dubai Creek Golf even has some references to Utzon’s Opera House in Sydney. These exclusive clubs have the status of cultural pearls. Dubai Creek Golf and Emirates Golf Club’s courses are, furthermore, ranked highly by the international golf community. They have been awarded several internationally recognised prizes, and quite a number of prominent people are members of these paradisiacal enclaves. Moreover, golf is an effective context of control—a liberated symbolic conduct that combines the acceptance of rules with strict discipline, the amalgamation of leisure time and work—and is thus typical of the new economy’s flexible production and sense of time. Golf courses have already become the most successful of the enclaves in the generic

²⁰ See the website of the shopping centre, at <http://www.waficity.com/insight/index.htm> (accessed March 19, 2003).

²¹ *Ibid.*



city; they are the contemporary city’s wonder-sprawl: “sprawl” because they look like sprawl (i.e., not nature), and “wonder” because golf has surprisingly become the social program that, on a global scale, has most successfully inhabited the idea of an empty green space.

At the same time as golf is conquering ever larger shares of the overall recreational landscape, the developmental patterns of Dubai’s contemporary urban landscape have also entered, a development that could be labeled the golf era. Several of the newest and most fashionable residential developments in Dubai have been built around greens and were initially laid out as golf-communities. (According to promotional literature, the twin aims of the future development in the Jumeirah district are that it “meets the needs of your family and provides you with the prestige of being steps away from Emirates Golf Club.”²²) All of the large villas have a view of an artificial landscape whose topography and picturesque protective planting conform to the requirements of a professional golf community, where views onto boundaries with the surrounding landscape as well as between individual properties are camouflaged by green areas. The view from the inside suggests that the private domain is unlimited, but Emirates Hills is, in reality, a restricted area: “for your comfort and peace of mind, we’ve made Emirates Hills a ‘gated community,’ with restricted access and round-the-clock security.”²³

TECOM: Oases of Free Ideas

As an information and network society, Dubai faces an internal conflict. On one hand, the economy must be able to function without restrictions in order to ensure continued growth; on the other hand, the authorities’ control of its symbolic space is one of the issues that lies closest to the heart of the post-political state. Dubai’s solution has been the introduction of a privileged zone of economic freedom under political responsibility: the so-called “Dubai Technology, Electronic Commerce and Media Free Zone,” TECOM, consisting of Dubai Internet City, Dubai Media City, and Dubai Ideas Oasis. The strategy is simply concerned with authorising total tax exemption to the media in order to guarantee that the torrent of speech is kept within the limits of “responsibil-

²² “The Greens at Emirates Golf Club,” promotional literature, 2002.

²³ “Emirates Hills,” promotional literature, 2002.

ity and accuracy:²⁴ if the information current becomes “irresponsible” or companies lose their sense of “accuracy,” tax exemption is automatically withdrawn, an arrangement that is apparently respected by the private media and information companies. Over 500 media companies, including CNN, Reuters, MBC and Sony Broadcast, have moved into the Media City; the Internet City has been inhabited by Microsoft, Oracle, HP, IBM, Compaq, Siemens, Cannon, Sony Ericsson and others; housing for more than 5,500 knowledge workers is under construction. The latest addition to the family will be Knowledge Village, “A vibrant, connected learning community that will develop the region’s talent pool and accelerate its move to the knowledge economy.”²⁵

The four existing enclaves, the new quartet of a “Knowledge Economy Ecosystem”²⁶ — the Oasis of Ideas, Internet City, Media City, and the American University—are located side by side in a square plan of approximately 200 hectares square. Internet City in the northeast and Media City in the southwestern corner are both figuratively oriented inwards to gardens with artificial lakes. In outline, the developments are identical: a corona of covered parking spaces frames modernistic blocks of glass. The three current main buildings of Media City resemble huge widescreen TVs with smooth, screen-like facades facing an artificial lake and outward-facing backsides that architecturally signal plug-in activity. The buildings of Internet City are more abstract: an intangible membrane of blue-black plate glass gives them the heavy, enigmatic aura of technological black boxes, which speaks silently of the information society’s absence of materiality and representative physiognomy. Although the knowledge and network societies fill the skyline in Dubai, it is still impossible to determine the architectural constructions behind the glass screen, or which physical contours this new information city will assume.

Sheik Zayed Road: Dubai’s Potemkin Corridor

Twenty kilometres from the new knowledge city, at the northern end of the E11 motorway between interchange No. 1 and the big roundabout by the World Trade Center, is where Dubai’s new modernistic showcase is located. This three kilometre-long road is the city’s “Little Manhattan,” where international finance and

24 “Freedom to Create,” advertisement and information brochure for Dubai Media City, 2002.

25 Cf. <http://www.dubaicityguide.com/specials/kv.htm> (accessed Jan. 29, 2003).

26 “@ - Dubai Internet City,” brochure, 2002, p. 4.

trade representations are lined up in the shape of a postmodern Wall Street backdrop. A single row of skyscrapers on each side of eight-lane Sheik Zayed Road sketches out the symbolic graph of the city’s towering economy and, at the same time, constitutes a sort of monumental town gate in the otherwise flat urban area. In addition to the seventies-monolithic World Trade Center, the Potemkin corridor consists of several characteristic block tower developments. Among others, the 300 metre high Chicago-style twin Emirates Towers; the half-as-high but four-towered and neo-Gothic Fairmont Hotel; the Big Ben-inspired, 243 metre high, residential “Tower” like a jewellery case; the 40-storey modern, Thai-style Dusit Dubai, and the future Burj Dubai by SOM.

From the correct angles, the double row of tower blocks is an impressive manifestation of the stacking aesthetics of commerce, but the two plate glass partitions seem to be of a very fragile consistency when perceived from the surrounding post-industrial urban landscape away from the skyline’s internal tunnel effect. This row of towers is probably designed as a representation of Dubai’s Central Business District, and as a trademark for its highly profile economy, but the symbol has also become, however unintentionally, a “nostalgic echo”²⁷ of a time when it was still possible to measure the city’s power metaphorically according to the height of its skyline.



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27 “Nostalgic Echo” is the title of a Salvador Dali painting from 1935, whose repeated motif appears as a detail in “The Suburbs of Paranoid-Critical City.” See Conroy Maddox, *Salvador Dali: Eccentric and Genius* (Cologne: Taschen, 1990), p. 52.