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THE SCHEHERAZADE SYNDROME: Fiction and Fact in Dubai's Quest to Become  
a Global City



Cities compete with each other for position in the global economy. Dubai has emerged as a leader in tactical deployment of narrative as a tool of urban branding. Its boosters draw upon the myths of the exotic desert-city oasis, or suggest that Dubai is a neoliberal free-market development legend or a techno-utopia in which human ingenuity conquers all obstacles. This article offers the tale of Scheherazade as a metaphor for discussion of the importance of storytelling in contemporary global urban marketing. The authors analyse Dubai's mythic urban image and reveal the paradoxes of its fantastical development, uncovering its unsustainable and inequitable dimensions.

## **The Scheherazade Syndrome**

Cities compete with each other to advantageously position themselves in the global economy. The project of urban branding has reached unprecedented levels of creativity and sophistication in many cities. However, Dubai is a leader in its tactical deployment of narrative: its agents and boosters sustain the pace of development by framing an arabesque of legends, myths, stories, and histories around its development.

Dubai boasts audacious and eccentric architectural and engineering marvels such as its famous indoor ski slope, the world's largest themed shopping mall, an underwater hotel, a man-made archipelago, and the most expensive airport ever built. In marketing and positioning, some of these projects intentionally draw upon the mythos of the exotic "oriental" desert-city oasis; others place Dubai at the centre of a neoliberal development legend about the inevitable success of free-market enclaves, or make it the setting for a techno-utopic future in which human ingenuity conquers all obstacles.

This article offers the tale of Scheherazade and the One Thousand and One Nights as a metaphor for a discussion of the importance of storytelling in the contemporary heightened global marketing competition for urban dominance. The authors analyse the role of the agents who have been instrumental in creating and implementing Dubai's mythic urban image, including design professionals, city boosters, and Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum. The analysis then reveals the paradoxes of Dubai's fantastical development, uncovering its unsustainable and inequitable dimensions. Finally, the authors evaluate the effectiveness of storytelling as a tool to approach the con

temporary global pressure to successfully position urban localities in global markets.

This project is based on extensive life experience, fieldwork, and architectural and planning professional practice in Dubai, and builds upon the burgeoning literature on city marketing in general and Dubai's development in particular. By exploring the implications of Dubai's Scheherazading, not only do we uncover its paradoxes, but we also offer a case study for other cities that may look to stories for their ascendancy.

## **A Thousand and One Projects: Development in Dubai**

### ***Planning the Road to Modernity***

Since the confederation of the seven United Arab Emirates in 1971, the region has been transformed by sweeping and rapid development. The most famous and remarkable transformation is the story of Dubai. Before independence, the Emirates were underdeveloped, with an economy based primarily on fishing and pearl diving.<sup>1</sup> During the pre-oil period, compact growth in Dubai was based on a 1960 master plan, prepared by British architect John Harris, that called for provision of a road system, land-use zoning, and creation of a new town centre. The master plan was updated with the construction of Port Rashid, and laid the foundation for an urban network and a system of municipal services. However, it proved to be a slow vehicle for development and did not foresee the subsequent explosive growth of the economy and city.<sup>2</sup>

Sheikh Rashid Bin Saeed Al Maktoum, ruler of Dubai from 1958 to 1990, started Dubai along its path to becoming a central player in the

region's trade by overseeing the dredging of the Dubai Creek and the construction of the first airport in 1958-1959, respectively. With the flow of trade continuing through Dubai's ports and airport, the government embarked on a series of projects to accommodate the demand for new wharfs, warehouses, and port facilities. In the 1970s, it undertook the expansion of Port Rashid to service larger ships, and later went on to create the largest manmade port at Jebel Ali, just south of the city.<sup>3</sup> Dubai thus developed into one of the world's busiest commercial and service centres, and, under the leadership of Sheikh Rashid's son Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum (Dubai's current ruler), the city set off on a swift modernization process.

### ***The Spectacularization of Dubai***

Sheikh Mohammed's goal, like his father's, has been to turn Dubai into a "world class tourist destination, an international financial center, an investment opportunities bliss, a manufacturing

and trading hub, and most recently a cosmopolitan residential option".<sup>4</sup> This is reflected in the wave of development since the end of the 1990s, which is characterized by rapid urban expansion in terms of both the scale and diversity of development projects and the physical spread of the city (Figs. 1 and 2).

Some of the projects that have helped establish the city as the region's hub for commerce, services and leisure are the construction of a series of "cities within the city" mega-projects, particularly the commercial free-trade zones of Jebel Ali. The area was designed specifically to cater to the needs and desires of technology and media companies; therefore, in order to attract major players in the "new economy", 100 per cent foreign ownership is allowed in those zones, with no individual or corporate taxes or import/export duties whatsoever. These special economic zones come in the shape of large office parks with food courts and artificial lakes.<sup>5</sup> Enormous shopping malls



**Figure 1.** From some vantage points, all of Dubai looks like a construction site. Photograph: Ali Ansary.



**Figure 2.** New development in Old Town Dubai, including the base of Burj Khalifa. Large development projects fail to produce an articulated urban fabric and demonstrate unsustainable use of water in the desert city. Photograph: Ameera Akkila.

and self-sufficient gated communities are also constructed alongside these.

The development of Dubai also became focused towards the creation of spectacularity when iconic projects were taken on with the encouragement of the current Sheikh. For example, Burj Al Arab—a sail-shaped building on the bay that has become the “postcard” image of Dubai, completed in 1998—is the world’s only seven-star hotel, and boasts an underwater restaurant as well as a helipad. Other spectacular projects include the man-made Palms and World Islands developments on the bay; Dubailand (the world’s largest amusement park); the tallest building in the world, Burj Khalifa (Fig. 3); Dubai Mall (the largest mall in the world); and Hydropolis (the world’s first underwater hotel).

Throughout the last decade, Dubai has been



**Figure 3.** Opening ceremonies at the Burj Khalifa, 4 January 2010. Photograph: Alamira Reem Bani shaping itself into the image of a “global city” via Hashim.

iconic architecture—seemingly on the theory that, if it looks like a global city, it will become one.<sup>6</sup> This quest led to near complete economic collapse in late 2009, as the emirate's debt challenged its leadership's ability to sell the image of material extravagance and architectural ambition to a world suddenly wary of real estate speculation.

#### The Role of Storytelling in Global Marketing Competition for Urban Dominance

Images comprise only one aspect of a story, and Dubai's boosters have used narrative desire in a much more comprehensive way to market it: the selective and revisionist production, reproduction, and dissemination of narratives about the city. Before going into an analysis of the case of Dubai, it is worthwhile to examine the history of place branding through a brief review of the vast literature on the subject.

David Harvey has examined the transition from a "managerial approach" to urban governance in the 1960s to an "entrepreneurial" one in the 1970s and 80s.<sup>7</sup> This "new entrepreneurialism" is characterized by the central role of public-private partnerships, a shift away from concerns of collective consumption to the political economy of place, and the speculative nature of the projects undertaken; urban entrepreneurialism is largely based upon manipulation of the urban landscape.<sup>8</sup> Gerry Kearns and Chris Philo elaborate that the practice of city branding

entails the various ways in which public and private agencies—local authorities and local entrepreneurs, often working collaboratively—strive to "sell" the image of a particular geographically-defined

"place", usually a town or city, so as to make it attractive to economic enterprises, to tourists and even to inhabitants of that place.<sup>9</sup>

Some of the ways that this ethos has found expression can be seen in aspects of public policy such as street beautification and cleaning, as well as in the investment of postindustrial cities in "high" culture. Stephen Ward argues that the last quarter of a century has seen an explosion in the practice of place marketing and promotion, in order to draw the "gaze" of the tourist.<sup>10</sup> The development or refurbishment of cultural attractions such as museums or art galleries, the boosting of business conventions, and the hosting of major sporting or cultural events also promote tourism and global visibility. Civic leaders use media to promote a favourable impression whilst challenging and undermining detrimental ideas about the place.<sup>11</sup>

Most relevant in the case of Dubai, architecture and urban design also play a major role in the grand formula of place marketing.<sup>12</sup> According to Anne-Marie Broudehoux, a few iconic "signature" or "trophy" buildings or structures designed by the world's leading architects such as Frank Gehry, Norman Foster, Cesar Pelli, or Zaha Hadid count for a great deal, especially in cities vying for attention and investment on the world stage. Michael Sorkin further contends that branding the "post-modern city" entails the creation of packaged cultural-historical experiences,<sup>13</sup> which have become prototypes for "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality, a hyperreal" as per Baudrillard.<sup>14</sup> As in the hotel-casinos of Las Vegas, says Clara Irazabal, urban visual imagery is deliberately manipulated to create a spectacle and a sense of alienation from time and reality for the purposes of facilitating consumerism and

hedonism.<sup>15</sup> Further, the selling of particular urban lifestyles has transformed the city into a space of performance, although as Guy Debord pointed out, “the only thing into which the spectacle plans to develop is itself”.<sup>16</sup> The spectacularization of the urban image is so central to the new urban economy that cities worldwide are relentlessly being converted into entertainment destinations.

Such city marketing has been critiqued as the “commodification” of place; Mark Goodwin claims that the city is packaged and sold as a commodity “like automobiles, cigarettes and mouth wash”.<sup>17</sup> This commodification may involve the manipulation of cultural resources for capital gain, or the promotion of reinvented heritage and history in order to lure potential investors

and tourists.<sup>18</sup> In Marxian terms, in this scenario the “exchange value” of cities as commodities in the market can become more salient than their “use value”—of course, the relationship between use and exchange value is a complex dialectic in the case of an urban environment. However, planning decisions made with a view toward entrepreneurialism tend to favour investments that draw transnational elites (such as Dubai’s light rail projects and condominium developments) over those which make the city more liveable for its indigenous and low-income population (such as affordable worker housing and comprehensive bus transit).

### **Storytelling and the Metaphor of Scheherazade and the One Thousand and One Nights**

As city boosters engage in place marketing and promotion through advertising, brochures, newspapers, press releases, iconic architecture,

spectacular events, and official urban plans, they weave together a more-or-less coherent yet purposeful serial story about the city. The pieces of that story are conveyed through varied media and emphasize specific parts of the story for targeted audiences. In the dynamic of storytelling, the tellers and the listeners in turn have power differentials that position them to partake differently in both the creation of the narratives and in their resulting benefits.

In introducing the notion of “storytelling” as an instrument of place marketing that combines fiction and facts, we argue that its role in the phenomenon of place promotion—at least to the extent that it is practiced in Dubai—is not fully accommodated within current literature on the subject. We acknowledge that storytelling has been used in city branding for a long time, maybe since cities existed. However, it has become more prominent since the rise of globalization in the last 25 years, as cities must now aggressively compete in the global market to attract investment and tourism.

We offer the story of Scheherazade and the One Thousand and One Nights as a metaphor to discuss the importance of storytelling in the contemporary heightened global marketing competition for urban dominance. This cycle of tales comprises interlocking stories that together form an infinite arabesque. The frame-narrative—which provides context and opens a space for the web of tales that follow—tells of the Sultan Shahryar of Arabia and his young wife Scheherazade, who tells stories in order to stay alive longer than the Sultan’s previous brides (who have all met their end the morning after their wedding day). Her strategy is simple: having “perused the books, annals and legends of preceding Kings, perused the works of the poets . . . and the sciences,

arts and accomplishments”<sup>19</sup>—she never lets her story come to an end. The perpetual deferral of the ending keeps the Sultan in a state of expectation and parallels the endless deferral of Scheherazade’s execution. This is the logic of the discursive technique: survival depends upon the infinite extension, the perpetual telling of a story.

Michel Foucault’s notion of “discourse” refers to a hegemonic construction that allows for a system of power (or “governmentality”)<sup>20</sup> to reproduce itself and maintain its grip over subjected populations. However, the notion of discourse mostly refers to a construction of a political-economic logic that seems plausible

(i.e. has “logical” validity for the explanation of social reality as experienced by the common individual) and is thus shared and consumed by the subjected people within a social group, e.g. within an Andersonian “imagined nation”.<sup>21</sup>

Storytelling, on the other hand, liberates discourse from the necessity of anchoring itself in plausible explanations of reality for the subjection of people within an endogenous social group. Storytelling can tap instead into implausible recreations of reality—fantasies— that people within a social group can embrace or not. These fantasies—still conceived by the elite, as other hegemonic discourses—are mostly exogenously targeted to people outside the social group, and in the case of urban storytelling, mostly build on spatial motives, reinventing the built environment in a manner that is aesthetically hedonistic, and economically functional. It is daring and hedonistic because it creatively pushes the envelope of traditional architectural and urban design spatiality, technology, and programming, allowing for users to enact new and even imaginary pleasurable roles in the storied urban spaces. Underneath its playfulness also lies a “rein

vented functionality” that makes these urban places ideal sites for the intensification of economic profitability through the promotion of consumption, production and hedonism.

Storytelling taps into fantasies or mythologies about a place or a people; as in Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*,<sup>22</sup> myth is a shorthand signifier which points to a recognizable cultural pattern and thus reifies this “truth” by depoliticizing it and casting it as implicit and timeless. Similarly, Walter Benjamin argues in his 1936 essay “The Storyteller”<sup>23</sup> that

there is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis. And the more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story’s claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience.

In both Barthes’ and Benjamin’s analyses, the more generic the myth, the more easily it is integrated into the memory of the listener. Of course, there is a difference between the largely structural analysis of the linguistic act in Barthes and the discursive description of the storytelling process in Benjamin. Our notion of Scheherazading takes its place somewhere in between the two: the frozen shorthand signification of the process of storytelling itself. The figure of Scheherazade becomes the signifier of storytelling (a character with hardly any characteristics beyond a vast memory for narrative)—as well as shorthand for the ethos of the “oriental”.

Edward Said’s seminal text *Orientalism*<sup>24</sup> argued that the study of Asia by Western scholars had

ossified “the Orient” into a normative concept, frozen in time by the gaze of western percipients. This reduced Easterners to a mythical “silent Other” and prevented those studied from articulating their own self-definition. However, in the case of Dubai, Oriental-ism is captured and reclaimed as a kind of cosmopolitan project in which Westerners and Easterners together mine the legend of the ancient East for the purpose of marketing the city. Per Michael Sorkin’s analysis, in which the branding of a “post-modern city” entails the deliberate creation of cultural-historical packages to produce a marketable pastiche,<sup>25</sup> Dubai is represented by turns in its advertising as an ancient Arabian desert kingdom, a hyper-modern cosmopolitan urban melting pot, and a techno-utopia. These contradictory narratives are woven together like the stories of the Thousand and One Nights, and together form the cultural myth of the place. Visitors may project themselves into various roles, moving through the city’s space like characters in the desert romances they are imagining. There is some irony in the use of the figure of Scheherazade in a critical discussion of Dubai’s branding; we feel that by dialectally inverting the structure of the Orientalist myth once again in order to describe this phenomenon, we can best highlight its paradox.

The mythos of Dubai, like Scheherazade’s stories, must be compelling and arresting; it must elicit suspense and expectation in order to maintain interest and investment. Its economic agents and the public at large must buy into the myth of Dubai (or at least, be fascinated by it) and thus contribute to creation, maintenance, and expansion of the city’s form—in order to fulfil the prophecy. Scheherazade’s life depends on the stories she weaves to entertain the Sultan; after every tale, she must leave him wanting more.

Similarly, Dubai’s ability to keep up with (or stay ahead of) the competition of urban attraction as a magnet for investment and tourism, especially in light of the rise of Asia’s “tiger cities”, depends heavily on the effectiveness of the players who weave and frame stories about Dubai to attract fancy and maintain a sense of wonder in tourists and investors. If Dubai ceases to tell its self-defining story, it could face disinvestment that could have a ripple effect across the city’s operations. Some have called this a “race to the bottom”, in which the negative impacts of city concessions to powerful capital agents multiply exponentially, harming workers and the environment in particular.

### **Who Tells What? Planner and Booster Scheherazades**

Sheikh Mohammed Al Maktoum is the key official figure that represents Dubai for global audiences. “Dubai’s CEO”, or “Sheikh Mo” is the mastermind behind the transformation of Dubai. Committed to his father’s dream of making Dubai one of the foremost cities in the world, he has turned a coastal desert into a “huge circuit board into which the elite of transnational engineering firms and retail developers are invited to plug in high-tech clusters, entertainment zones, artificial islands, [and] ‘cities within cities’”.<sup>26</sup> Given its limited oil reserves, Dubai’s ruling family long ago realized that the state’s future lay in serving as the commercial hub of the Arab Middle East.

Sheikh Mohammed’s strategy to stimulate foreign investment is to significantly reduce bureaucratic procedures and taxes. In this scheme the government works on developing infrastructure and providing an environment that encourages the growth of business; in



other words, the city becomes a framework— an exemplar of the Washington Consensus. This gives the private sector a chance to benefit from investment opportunities, and until recently investors believed that risk was significantly reduced. It also makes Dubai a laboratory to evaluate the effectiveness of neoliberal development initiatives.

The Sheikh's vision for Dubai has been articulated in several explicit strategic vision statements, especially "Dubai 2010" and "Dubai Strategic Plan 2015". Generally, the plans outline broad goals: becoming integrated in the global economy and developing a knowledge economy and a powerful business network. However, they also include some social initiatives, such as improving education and health care, taking advantage of the female workforce, upgrading land use and environmental practices to follow sustainable standards, and ensuring security, justice, and safety for residents, workers, and visitors.

Historically, however, the Sheikh's actions— from his speeches to his development plans— have represented a deliberate attempt to construct a competitive story about Dubai in the global capitalist market. For instance, he is credited with the first sketch of the Palm Jebel Ali. The Palm Island is intended as a getaway for residents and visitors and incorporates luxury hotels and residences, entertainment destinations, and detached water-homes positioned in such a way that they spell out one of the Sheikh's epigrams in Arabic script. The script says, "Take wisdom from the wise people; Not everyone who rides is a jockey". Read anecdotally, this accesses precisely the kind of Orientalist mythic ethos that makes Dubai into a stage-set for its visitors' Arabian fantasies. Read critically, this phrase might arouse suspicion that not everything one sees

in Dubai is authentic, permanent, or altogether wise. In any case, Sheikh Mohammed is constantly engaged in crafting novel stories about the city, an accomplished practitioner in the art of branding places. However, he is not the sole narrator in story-weaving about Dubai. A myriad of designers and city boosters further orchestrate and implement the city's image as "Las Vegas on steroids".

### *Design Professional Scheherazades*

Architecture and urban development are used as modes of advertising and are valued for their capacity to brand the urban skyline, functioning as gigantic outdoor advertisements, and featuring transnational "starchitects" who are eager for the opportunity to create ambitious projects.<sup>27</sup> For example, the skyscraper Burj Dubai (now Burj Khalifa) (Fig. 4)



Figure 4. Burj Khalifa. Photograph: Alamira Reem Bani Hashim.

was designed by Chicago-based Skidmore, Owings and Merrill; the hotel Burj Al Arab was created by the famous W.T. Atkins; and there are hotels planned in the Palm Islands as well as Downtown Burj Dubai by the likes of Trump Associates and Giorgio Armani. These designer buildings have become essential tools of place marketing and are tradable symbols of value. Furthermore, architects, developers, and urban designers are vigorously marketing the physical attractions of their developments together with the services included, turning into skilful propagandists trying to “sell” images and meanings.

Heritage management and reinvention, the editing and marketing of the past, are much used place-marketing devices that rely on the manipulation of urban form and experience.<sup>28</sup> Here, the fabrication of culture becomes a profitable economic activity, wherein design professionals aim to abstract and recreate the “traditional” built environment with the goal of creating unique places and experiences for the visitor.<sup>29</sup> Much of the architecture in Dubai is suggestive of this: Burj al Arab depicts the shape of a sail to symbolize the country’s maritime history; the Palm Islands take on the form of palm trees to signify the ancient desert-palm oasis; even Burj Khalifa features residential projects (The Old Town and The Old Town Island) which gesture towards Arab architectural designs. “Our attempt is to recreate an aura of the olden days; this will certainly attract tourists to Dubai”, explains the managing director of Emaar.<sup>30</sup> Franchises such as the immense Jumeirah group—which has developed luxury hotels, resorts, and residences, as well as restaurants, stores, a water-park, and a spa—advertise themselves as providing “a vista of ancient Arabia” along with “spacious opulence, seclusion and impeccable service”. Property developers argue that the

hype generated by the projects is worth the investment risks: “If there was no Burj Dubai, no Palm, no World, would anyone be speaking of Dubai today? . . . You shouldn’t look at the projects as crazy stand-alones ... It’s part of the building brand”.<sup>31</sup> Through these projects, architects, planners, urban designers, and developers portray the story of an exciting city that has come from being a desert backwater to being a global leader in just a few decades.<sup>32</sup>

Central to the development boom are two of Dubai’s leading developers, Emaar and Nakheel (actually parastatal development companies owned by the government), which have worked to create an image of progress and dynamism where “the fastest, biggest, most amazing structures are being built in order to attract the affluent and the talented, all essential to the consolidation of the Dubai brand”.<sup>33</sup> This global-scale architecture is meant to set world records and challenge the norm; however, not all design professionals subscribe to the myth of Dubai’s success as a development utopia: “things happen at such a speed, in such a fragmented way, and with so little governmental oversight that to find one person with a complete grasp of what’s going on is a very, very difficult task”, says Reinier de Graaf, a partner at the Office for Metropolitan Architecture.<sup>34</sup> Without adequate oversight or regulation, the frenetic pitch of hyper-development can lead to a lack of coordinated, comprehensive systems and other planning problems.

In view of this critique, it is notable that in recent years development rhetoric has been geared toward the catchphrases of smart-city development: “mixed-use”, “sustainable”, and “density”—with plenty of advertising that aims to make the case that some of the

developments going up are “green”, that the new light-rail system will atone for all the sins of car-centred transport planning—or that, now that the “sudden city” has been built, the gaps will be filled in with all sorts of sustainable urban-design interventions such as self-powered buildings, a solar water-desalination plant, a subway, and the light-rail system (Fig. 5). It seems that the latest story told by the design professionals of Dubai is that, somehow, intensive building in the desert is in fact a sustainable plan for a green future.

### ***City Booster Scheherazades: Marketers and Event Organizers***

Striving to be competitive within the globalizing economy, Dubai’s city boosters have tried to increase its distinctiveness and character through shopping festivals, conferences and symposia, as well as spectacular events such as air shows and music concerts. As Clara Irazabal notes,

There are no neat boundaries between places and events (between space and time), particularly under extraordinary

circumstances; . . . places are fluidly yet definitely marked by the (extraordinary) events that occur in them; and . . . events are largely shaped and sustained—i.e., embodied and made memorable—by the physical qualities of the sites in which they take place.<sup>35</sup>

One of the most prominent events staged in Dubai is the Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF) which, since 1996, has annually attracted over

3.5 million visitors, chiefly from the Gulf States, Europe, Africa and Asia, who have spent well over US\$3 billion.<sup>36</sup> Apart from the retail boom, the spillover effects of the festival have benefitted hotels, transport, restaurants and related services: some residents reportedly earn more during the festival than during the rest of the year.<sup>37</sup> In addition, Dubai hosts horse and camel races, air shows, an annual Global Village festival, conventions, symposia, film festivals, a fireworks festival, and musical and other performances year-round.

Hallmark events coupled with strong advertising campaigns create a perception of Dubai as an international cultural centre. City boosters



**Figure 5.** Metro line along Sheikh Zayed Road. Photograph: Alamira Reem Bani Hashim.

promote this image through publicity materials that seduce the reader by placing her, once again, in the scene—a character in a legend of desert luxury. For example, on reading a Nakheel brochure about Palm Jumeirah, relocating executives find themselves invited to live in a destination with unprecedented imagination, which is welcoming its first residents, residents who are becoming a part of history (Fig. 6). They can “swim at pristine beaches with breathtaking open sea views”, and can park their boats at “world class marinas”. They can also play in a nine-hectare park located next to a world class retail centre and an exceptional entertainment plaza, and can ride the “state of the art” monorail which connects the island’s many features. The relocating executive never has to leave the island for his/her needs, and can live [in] “the 8th wonder of the world”. Yet this vision of a



**Figure 6.** Highrise buildings along Sheikh Zayed Road. Photograph: Alamira Reem Bani Hashim.

twenty-first century paradise co-exists with packaged offerings of Arab-Islamic culture: Dubai’s official webpage advertises “old-world souks and modern shopping malls, rolling sand dunes and championship grass golf courses, remote Bedouin villages and an array of five-star hotels”.

As Ahmed Kanna argues in his article “The State Philosophical in the Land Without Philosophy”,<sup>38</sup> three aspects of these propagandistic descriptions stand out: the emphasis on size; the self-sufficiency and luxuriousness of the projects; and the fabrication, literally or symbolically inside, of the natural or outdoor world (lakes, ski resorts, cityscapes, etc.). Dubai’s marketers also make sure to promote Dubai’s investor-friendly regulations, its tax incentives, support and openness for business, as well as its high standard of living, its crime-free environment, year-round sunshine, cosmopolitan population, and once again, its “smart”, “sustainable”, “mixed-use” projects.

### **Enchanting Stories for Whom? The Paradoxes of Dubai’s Development**

The Scheherazades of Dubai have had consequences for the quality and appearance of the built environment, and also on the quality of the ecological environment and the lives of city dwellers. In the race to enhance their city’s exchange value, or as they become too successful at positioning their cities as attractive nodes in the global market, city agents can act to the detriment of their cities’ use-value. Dubai’s development, for instance, is neither all-enchanting nor enchanting for all. Instead, it is troubled by profound paradoxes. Critics such as Mike Davis and Daniel B. Monk have counted Dubai among the most exemplary “evil paradises” and “dreamworlds

of neoliberalism” in the world.<sup>39</sup> For them, Dubai is a capitalist utopia devoid of diversity in its elite ranks, and oblivious to social welfare concerns. As such, the city is a spatial manifestation of social inequality and unsustainable development in the service of a global bourgeois class at the expense of the global poor. Davis further describes Dubai as a city consumed “by a nightmarish and kind of apocalyptic presentism”. These dramatic assertions, despised by some as mere provocations, do find their grounding as we uncover the unsustainable and inequitable dimensions of Dubai’s development, the troubling realities that are hidden behind the “desert paradise” tapestry.

### ***Unsustainable Development in Dubai***

The wild pace and character of Dubai’s unparalleled development has proven to be unsustainable. To demonstrate this, we discuss some of the many aspects of that development, including transport and traffic congestion, power and water availability, and the destruction of marine habitats. While city planners in Dubai realize that measures need to be taken to reverse the negative effects of development, the biggest pitfall of this realization is that it is reactive rather than proactive. Dubai has launched a considerable number of urban infrastructure projects to support development, but it seems to constantly be trying to catch up to the pace of its sprouting architectural and urban design developments and their negative spillover effects.

Dubai’s rapid development has necessitated a reworking of the city’s infrastructure, and although the road network is constantly under construction, infrastructure is not comprehensively planned and upgraded vis-a-vis development. As a result of endless construction of the

seemingly poorly thought-out road network (infamous for offering U-turns that take you miles out of your way), there is tremendous traffic congestion for many hours of the day, particularly along Sheikh Zayed Road—the city’s main artery and the backbone of Dubai’s image (Fig. 7). In addition, Samer Bagaen reports that

while the city’s population has grown at an average annual rate of 6.4 per cent over the past three years, the number of cars on the road has increased by 10 per cent each year, soaring from 350,000 to 750,000 over the period 2004-2006.<sup>40</sup>

In order to deal with traffic congestion, Dubai has invested in the introduction of a toll system, Salik, on major routes throughout the city. It is doubtful, however, that the toll system will succeed in its attempts to encourage carpooling and the use of public transportation: Cars are still the preferred method for getting around, and a major symbol of prestige, but this restricts mobility for the lower income classes. Nevertheless, investment in public transport is a major component of Dubai’s plans for the future. Parts of its urban heavy-rail



**Figure 7.** Nakheel billboard on a congested street advertising the development “The World”. Photograph: Alamira Reem Bani Hashim.

system opened in September 2009; when complete it will include two lines and 37 stations. While the project is still on the path to completion, it is difficult to assess its impact; however, as of August 2009, it was already three billion dollars over budget, according to Mattar Al Tayer, Chairman and Executive Director of Dubai's Roads and Transportation Authority. It is also safe to assume that public transportation will only succeed if people are educated about the negative effects of cars on traffic flow and air quality, and if riding public transport becomes part of the culture (i.e., not negatively stereotyped) and provides an effective, convenient, and safe mode of transportation.

In addition to transportation problems, concerns have arisen about power and water availability for the ever-increasing number of developments sprouting in the desert. The climate in Dubai leads to a high demand for energy to cool its many buildings, as temperatures in the summer approach 42 °C. Major initiatives are needed to expand the capacity of both electricity generation and water provision in a sustainable manner in order to meet the rapidly growing demand. Currently, the UAE is greatly dependent on the availability of cheap energy from oil to desalinate water, provide air conditioning, and run motor vehicles, but as the country is becoming more aware that a lifestyle involving intensive consumption of fossil fuels is not sustainable in the long run, it has begun to tap into renewable sources of energy.<sup>41</sup>

In fact, big developers such as Emaar and Nakheel are taking major steps towards exploring alternative means of energy: Emaar set up a new entity—Emaar Utilities—that will focus on promoting water and electricity conservation measures and sustainable environment practices in all Emaar projects in Dubai.<sup>42</sup> Nakheel has

implemented a water-recycling system that uses grey-water for a variety of purposes, such as landscaping irrigation and district cooling systems. Yet, these initiatives are mostly reacting to the rising problems and are not keeping pace with expanding needs. With the World Wildlife Fund placing Dubai second in the world for per capita carbon emissions, it becomes urgent that the UAE's government exert pressure for greater corporate responsibility and green and sustainable architectural and urban design.<sup>43</sup>

There is also much concern over the marine habitat of the Gulf waters. As a result of the dredging and re-depositing of sand for the construction of the Palm and World archipelagos, the ecosystems of the Gulf have been devastated. In addition to being clouded with silt, the water's currents have been altered and natural beaches have eroded. Nick Meo reports that local divers have witnessed coral reefs and oyster beds buried under tons of sand and boulders, and says that turtles and fish are scarce.<sup>44</sup> In response to the damage, Nakheel—the development company behind the island projects—and Environment Health and Safety (EHS) have pledged to jointly develop a marine biology laboratory as part of an environmental monitoring programme for the waters of the Arabian Gulf. While these efforts are necessary to save the marine habitats from future destruction, the marine habitats already faced tremendous, and maybe irreversible, degradation before measures were taken to limit and redress the damage done. It also remains to be seen how effective these initiatives will be, beyond their public relations purposes.

Proactive planning has been recently attempted in Dubai in light of the growing realization of the negative externalities of

development. The city has introduced several strategic plans with regard to urban planning and heritage conservation such as the Strategic Urban Growth Plan for the Emirate of Dubai (2000-2050), the Structural Plan for Dubai Urban Area (2000-2020), the First Five Year Plan for Dubai Urban Area (2000-2005), and several other legislative initiatives on land use in Dubai, including the inaugural Dubai Forum for Sustainable Development in March 2006.<sup>45</sup> The strategic plans were commissioned by the government to guide the physical and economic development of the city into the twenty-first century. The profit-driven emphasis of Dubai's rapid development, however, has made it really challenging for longer-term planning to get the support it deserves and needs in order to move from ideas to action: the story of ecological degradation is not often told by the city's mouthpieces.

#### *Inequitable Development in Dubai*

Though Dubai's Scheherazades present it as a paradise, beyond its facade there are substantial socio-spatial inequities. For instance, during the boom the range and pace of development boosted real estate prices in Dubai, which in turn had a significant impact on the cost of living. In some parts of the city, residential rents rose by almost 20-40 per cent in the first half of 2005 and again by up to 50 per cent in 2007. While Samer Bagaeen states that there was an official 15 per cent cap on rent increases until the end of 2006, Dubai faces a challenge when it comes to providing affordable housing to all residents.<sup>46</sup>

Under the old land regime, real estate in Dubai could only be owned by UAE nationals, and with limitations by nationals of the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. In addition, it was almost impossible to reside in

the emirate if not employed. In 2002, however, a law was passed in Dubai allowing the ownership of certain real estate projects by people of all nationalities.<sup>47</sup> This led to an explosion in property development.<sup>48</sup> Yet, with prices shooting upwards, many residents could not afford to access the real estate market. Additionally, though much of the vacated housing in older developments was filtered down to low-income expatriates, in general there is limited state provision of housing for this social group.<sup>49</sup>

Citizenship and real estate access control structures of social privilege and keep everybody in Dubai literally in his/her place in the social hierarchy. In 1971 (when the UAE formed), people who had already been in the cities of the UAE for years (from Yemen, Oman, Baluchistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, etc.), and were contributing to the economy, had the opportunity to apply for citizenship. Citizenship was granted based on the applying families' reputation. This practice was stopped in 1980 in order to control immigration, which was rapidly increasing as the country saw an influx of people from Asian and Arab countries. As Davis discusses, a class-based and racial hierarchy is firmly maintained: those who own commercial land in Dubai are at the top of the pyramid. Next, the native 15 per cent of the population constitutes a leisure class subsidized by income transfers, free education, and government jobs. A step below are the 150,000 or so British expatriates, along with other European, Lebanese, and Indian managers and professionals, who live in air-conditioned affluence. Mike Davis writes in his 2005 article "Does the Road to the Future end at Dubai?":

South Asian contract laborers, legally bound to a single employer and subject

to totalitarian social controls, make up the great mass of the population. Dubai lifestyles are attended by vast numbers of Filipina, Sri Lankan, and Indian maids, while the building boom is carried on the shoulders of an army of poorly paid Pakistanis and Indians working twelve hour shifts, six and half days a week, in the blast-furnace desert heat.<sup>50</sup>

As others reassert, Dubai's Disney-like image and lifestyle are dependent on importing low paid labour for the construction, maintenance, and service of its vast developments.<sup>51</sup> Emirati citizens have increasingly taken on higher ranking and better paid jobs as the country has become richer and its citizens more educated, so great numbers of workers have been recruited from elsewhere to take over menial, low-paying jobs. For most of these workers, travelling abroad has enabled them to make important economic contributions to their families back home (Fig. 8).

However, news items appear frequently in the media about the poor treatment of the labourers who work in Dubai's construction

and service sectors, and their underpayment relative to promised wages. The workers live in accommodation camps in the middle of the desert or on the outskirts of the city, where they are crammed six to twelve in a room sometimes without air conditioning. We witnessed these conditions in fieldwork. The US State Department's 2000 UAE Country Report on Economic Policy and Trade Practices stated that, "health standards are not uniformly observed in the housing camps provided for foreign workers".<sup>52</sup> Substandard living conditions as well as the mistreatment of labourers by their contractors have been mentioned frequently in reporting.<sup>53</sup> An article in the New York Times described a riot that took place at the site of what has become the world's tallest skyscraper in Dubai. Reporter Hassan Fattah writes: "When hundreds of workers angered by low salaries and mistreatment rioted Tuesday night . . . they [were] expressing the growing frustration of Asian migrants here".<sup>54</sup> The array of labourers' complaints include, excessive work hours, verbal and/or physical abuse, retention of documents, restriction of



**Figure 8.** Labourers on construction site. Photograph: Ahmad Huzair.



movements and most prominently the nonpayment of wages. With new regulations, ministry officials can ban an employer from further employment of workers should the employer fail to protect its workers' rights and to follow labour law. The Ministry of Labor blacklisted over 1000 firms in 2004 for violating labour law, particularly for failing to pay salaries, employing workers who were sponsored by others, or providing substandard living or working conditions.<sup>55</sup> The Ministry requires that employers ensure a safe working and living environment and requires all contractors to employ a certified occupational safety officer, but according to inspector reports these requirements are often ignored.

Criticism of the Ministry's inefficiency in responding to the complaints of the labourers is widespread. According to The State Department's 2000 UAE Country Report on Economic Policy and Trade Practices, "the Ministry is understaffed and under-budgeted; complaints and compensation claims are backlogged". Additionally, Fattah reports:

Only 80 government inspectors oversee about 200,000 companies and other establishments that employ migrant workers . . . The sheer numbers of workers who have poured into the country over the past two years and inadequate staffing at the ministry have meant that many problems slip through.

Although the State Department's Report says that, "the government announced in 2000 that it intends to establish a new court system to speed up labor cases",<sup>56</sup> the labour and welfare consul at the Consulate General of India in Dubai, B.S. Mubarak, reported in 2006, "there's such a boom and so many laborers required here that the government is bringing measures

which are not entirely adequate . . . Neither we nor the ministry can cope with the growing number of laborers and growing number of complaints".<sup>57</sup> Considering the Labor Laws of the UAE, it is evident that the government and the Ministry, despite their shortcomings, are making some institutional efforts to tend to the workers' needs.<sup>58</sup>

However, much more remains to be done for the Ministry to increase its staff and strongly enforce its rules so that no employer disrespects workers' rights. That this still remains the case in Dubai is a demonstration that priority has not been given to assuring that development takes place in an equitable manner. Spatially, the remote location of the labour accommodation camps from the high-rise buildings and luxury hotels of the UAE demonstrates an attempt to sustain the myth that Dubai is a place of luxury without slums or poverty.<sup>59</sup> Residents and visitors to Dubai may hardly notice the workers, unless it is the end of their shift and they are lining up to board their buses home to the work camps on the city outskirts. As Yasser Elsheshtawy points out, an entrenched geographical/spatial division is developing in which there are areas with a high concentration of the poor, in contrast to enclaves housing the very rich.<sup>60</sup> Highly visible income and lifestyle differences lead inevitably to socio-spatial polarization, and possibly social conflict and instability, between high-and low-income workers, particularly national and low-income non-national workers.<sup>61</sup> Given the negative externalities of development in Dubai, which have lately garnered attention in the media, it becomes ever more crucial to include sustainable and equitable practices in the city's plans to become one of the world's leading capitals of tourism and trade. Furthermore, given the substantial and

growing evidences of the negative impacts of current development in the city now further compounded by the financial crisis, the mythic version of Dubai that its Scheherazades have portrayed seems an unsustainable mirage. The idea that the city can continue developing without due consideration of its environment and social fabric is a fiction. As the paradoxes of development become evident, bad publicity has started to hurt the image that Dubai's Scheherazades have worked so hard to create, and could discourage tourists from visiting and corporations from investing in the Emirate. In order to save Dubai, the Scheherazades in charge would do well to invest their efforts into creating a sustained collaborative effort to raise everybody's boats (equitable development) and to keep them afloat (sustainable development).

The need for a more integrated self-definition—a legend that includes provisions for the welfare of all stakeholders and for the region's ecology—has become even more pronounced with Dubai's recent troubles. The near-collapse of its economy in late 2009 was global headline news: Reuters reported on 26 November 2009 that Dubai was at least 80 billion dollars in debt.<sup>62</sup> Its parastatal development corporations Dubai World and Nakheel accounted for most of these liabilities, and the state had to ask creditors to agree to a standstill on debt payments. There were fears that a collapse could have a ripple effect around the world, pulling European and American investment markets down with Dubai (one of the drawbacks to being a player in the global cities network).

This news broke just as construction on the Burj Dubai was completed. December's news that oil-rich neighbour Abu Dhabi would bail its troubled fellow emirate out of debt was

closely followed by the opening of the tower—which had been renamed for Sheik Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the ruler of Abu Dhabi and president of the United Arab Emirates. The tower opened in a shower of fireworks and a media frenzy—and the city's Scheherazades kept spinning their story: "Crises come and go. And cities move on", Mohammed Alabbar, chairman of the tower's developer Emaar Properties, told reporters before the inauguration. "You have to move on. Because if you stop making decisions, you stop growing".<sup>63</sup> If Dubai stops growing—if it stops telling itself and others its story about the perpetual expansion of paradise into the desert—it will lose all of its investment, and the race to the bottom could become unstoppable. Like Scheherazade, Dubai cannot possibly stop telling its story.

### **Conclusion: (The Failure of) Bewitching Globalization?**

The myth is that of an Eldorado Negro, where towers scratch the cottony bottoms of clouds, where the impossible is possible, where everyone can make money and be happy. Well, the skyline is littered with the skeletons of those towering dreams, and thousands of people, from CEOs to tiffin-carrying Indian labourers, have been laid off and sent packing.<sup>64</sup>

—Raymond Beauchemin

The case of Dubai exemplifies the Scheherazade Syndrome in today's global world. It also elucidates the process by which storytelling attempts to sway global forces by successfully positioning urban localities in global markets. The risks created by the relentless investment in a mythic image through (unsustainable and inequitable) urban

development cannot be overemphasized, and Dubai offers one of the greatest cautionary tales in this regard.

Since the partial unravelling of Dubai's myth of perpetual development, the gaps in its narrative are becoming news. In a recent Chicago Tribune article, Blair Kamin took the city to task for its failures in planning:

The emirate and its leaders appear obsessed with architectural superlatives at the expense of the fundamentals of making livable cities . . . It is a city of isolated enclaves, lacking convenient connections to one another, and brutal linear strips, exemplified by the eyesore high-rises along the emirate's main drag, a superwide highway called Sheikh Zayed Road. The patches of the urban quilt desperately need to be stitched together. So Dubai faces hard choices as it looks ahead—between spectacle and sustain-ability, the city as a collection of architectural objects or a contiguous urban fabric.

In the Arabian Nights, Scheherazade defies death by bewitching the Sultan Shahryar with her stories—and he succumbs to her enchantment, pardons her life, and makes her queen. However, saving a city requires a more intense and collaborative effort. In Dubai, the endeavour of the Scheherazades has brought about impressive levels of economic and touristic development, but is rapidly eroding the city's environmental and social systems. The challenge for Dubai's Scheherazades is to be as courageous in promoting sustainable and equitable development as they have been daring in promoting dazzling architectural and urban design projects. Dubai's recent crisis— one might even say “market failure”—provides the opportunity for a change of course. The legend of Dubai needs to change from a tale of spectacular ambition, luxury and fantasy—to one of a legendarily achievable, sustainable, and equitable showplace of comprehensive planning.

This is just not an option, but an unavoidable and urgent imperative, lest Dubai's bliss sink into the quicksands of its desert.

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