DREAMS OF GOLDEN CLOUDS

HOW TO DRAW A GLOBAL METROPOLIS WITH A CAMEL SWITCH

In Abu Dhabi, everything is upsidedown. Outside it's as hot as an engine room – you step in and it's as cold as the tundra. Within the city, avenues are treelined and buildings are sleeved with verdure. Beyond, the countryside is bare. Looking out across the aching desert there is no one, and yet they are building a city here for four million people. Who? Where are they?

To a West obsessed with contextual responsiveness, the vision of a lone Sheikh marching out into the sand with his camel switch and declaring a new global metropolis seems appalling brash. London was ever the reluctant capital, yoked together out of stubborn towns and parishes, and clinging tenaciously to its village greens, and a sense of "organic" conurbation. Yet this contemporary passion for natural metaphors, stretching even to things as incontrovertibly man-made as the city, speciously eludes a rich history of deliberate city founding. It was political will and state-led investment, not "natural growth", which created the Romes and the Alexandrias of the ancient world. And now in a not dissimilar fashion, the bold and young current leaders of Abu Dhabi are unrolling their urban visions into otherwise empty space.

After the death of Sheikh Zayed in 2004 his son, Sheikh Khalifa, acceded to the position of ruler of Abu Dhabi, and de facto president of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It was at this point that, as Joe Tabet, Head of Architecture at Atkins Abu Dhabi, puts it, 'everything went whoosh'. New land was earmarked for development and distributed, major new civic projects were put forward, and tens of billions of dollars of infrastructural investment were announced. Gerard Evenden, Senior Partner at Fosters and Partners, remembers going to Abu Dhabi 3 years ago to find an unassuming little town with a few people saying, 'This is going to be big – bigger than Dubai, bigger than anything else.' The next day he was driving a 4x4 across the desert sands to reach the site where now, a few years on, a colossal Abu Dhabi World Trade Centre is under construction. Evenden's WTC heads the 10km Al Raha corridor of freezone coastal expansion, slated to comprise over half a million sqm of office and retail space, as well as a string of 25 storey residential towers, and 2,000 hotel rooms. A few kilometers away the 6 million sqm zero carbon Masdar Development is underway, right next to a 20m passenger a year KPF airport terminal. Bundled together, these projects represent less than 10% of the new build envisaged under the Abu Dhabi 2030 Urban Plan.

Since the plan's release last year, land prices have been tripling. Plots are traded nine to ten times before any visible work starts. Sometimes when it does, it is merely the developer trucking a single pile of sand back and forth to create the semblance of activity, while waiting to sell at an inflated price. Homes pass through multiple owners before becoming anything more real than a sophisticated rendering. New developers open 'almost daily' according to Miles Payne of Strutt & Parker Property Consultants, while development consultants like Atkins have been ballooning at growth rates of 40–50% a year. 'It's like the oil!' says Atkins' Joe Tabet as he bounces on his chair, 'It's boiling! It's bubbling up!'

Reinier de Graaf, Partner at OMA, speaks of the obsolescence of demographic need for city building in the Middle East, where instead the built form is a byproduct of investment opportunities (adding grimly, 'You can imagine what the situation is like now'). The leading role taken by speculators in the Gulf's construction boom (comprising an estimated US$1.9 trillion of projects) has provoked much metaspeculation as to how sustainable this can possibly be. After all, the production of architecture isn't itself an economy, nor can it single-handedly create a city. The boom may stimulate enough activity to fuel itself for a while – construction workers flood in, as do consultants and lawyers, who all need maids and taxi drivers and so on – but at some point people do actually have to come, and do things as quotidian as work in the new offices, and live in the new homes.

Lynton Jones, who set up the Dubai International Financial Exchange in 2003, describes the development of an area twice the size of Canary Wharf as an explicit 'property play': 'you create the buildings to be able to sell them.' However, while on the one hand this evinces the core real-estate-venturing character of Dubai, the story simultaneously points to how, if approached intelligently, this needn't be a problem. Dubai cannily recognised the importance for its scheme of both an international stock exchange and a regulatory framework meeting international standards, and so, as with the architecture, foreign consultants were called in to assemble them. These, in combination with favourable tax conditions, were all the financial institutions needed. They came, bought the buildings, moved in, and for the Sheikhs who launched the venture, all passed off very profitably. Indeed to attract business in general, tax breaks, political stability, and sound legal structures are mostly all you need. People will come, and the country will grow. And so, you have to ask, why not new urban centres in the desert? In fact, the total absence of competing land uses makes the desert all the more sensible a place for them.

But beyond this, there is a real case for the Gulf actually wanting and needing a global metropolis. The UAE is strategically located at a natural mid point, 7 hours flight from Europe, and 10 from the Far East. Moreover, it is within 3 hours flight of some 2 billion potential workers, who are currently languishing in stifling and underproductive environments – in much of the Middle East, in Pakistan, in Sudan and so on – but who see the UAE as an opportunity to get away from turbulence at home, and enter the globalised economy. For these people and their business talents, Abu Dhabi represents a liberal, pro-growth, stable and open place to work. Already the UAE is astonishingly international, with emiratis accounting for less than one fifth of the population, and under 10% of private sector jobs. The rest is composed of Arabs from neighbouring states, high salary expats, and the schools of cheap labour from emerging economies who man the construction teams, and cook and clean and drive and massage – a demographic assemblage characterised by Rem Koolhaas as 'the pampered and the pamperers'. Leveraging their output, Abu Dhabi has ambitions to become a financial centre, a trade hub, a conference nucleus, a manufacturing base, and even an international media voice. It is almost a miniature nineteenth century America, calling out to enterprising workers of the East to partake in its structured abundance – an abundance not of fertile land, but of thoughtfully crafted urban and business environments.

Abu Dhabi has been spurred into action by its youthful new leadership and their clarity of vision. A further spike on the rowel isundeniably the rivalry with Dubai. It is worth remembering that the staggering sums of investment capital wielded by the emirates and their daring Sheikhs are championed on either side of a tiny stage. They are quite literally two neighbouring families, engaged in what Tabet describes as 'healthy competition', with hosts of cousins operating under a 'my building is better than your building' logic. The more cynical Reinier de Graf sees simple envy among men who all know each other well, adding, 'it's as basic as I describe it to you'. Either way, conscious of Dubai's recent progress, Abu Dhabi has developed a metropolis urge of its own, but deliberately trained its course on different stars. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the plans for Saadiyat Island, set to be a new capital for world culture.

Saadiyat Island is the location for an enormous new US$200m Frank Gehry Guggenheim (twice the budget for Bilbao), a US$108m Jean Nouvel Louvre (part of a US$1.3bn deal with the French Minister for Culture, including US$548 for use of the word "Louvre"), a 6,300 seater Zaha Hadid Performing Arts Centre, and a Foster & Partners Sheikh Zayed National Museum. Alongside these big four will be a trail of 19 cultural pavillions based on the Venice Biennale concept. The island development, which will further include hotels, resorts, golf courses, and luxury housing, is prospectively budgeted at US$27bn. This "constellation of cultural attractions" will be a lodestone for global tourism, and the new pearl of the Arabian coast.

The same oxy-morons that apply to speculative financial developments reappear, in that the Sheikhs are building in a vacuum in order to create demand. At present there is no art to hang in Abu Dhabi' Louvre, nor is there an orchestra to play or a ballet to dance in Hadid's anfracutous halls. Ironically the design, which resembles a giant complicated sports sneaker, is described by Hadid as a 'growing organism', gathering in complexity to achieve performance spaces 'which spring from the structure like fruits on a vine'. In reality of course, the desert whence it springs offers no fruits and no vines, either literally or artistically. It yields naught but oil.

FIRST DRILL HOLES

While Abu Dhabi's openness to immigration and enterprise in part resembles the young America, there is an elemental difference: the Native Americans were decimated and roundly pushed around; in contrast, the native emiratis are firmly in control. Their power stems from Abu Dhabi's most formidable piece of upsidedownness – that 0.01% of the world's population sits atop almost 10% of the world's proven oil reserves. This is a phenomenal endowment, yielding tens of billions of dollars a year. Even pumping at current rates of 2.5 million barrels a day, Abu Dhabi's wells are good for another century or more. The emirate is much richer than Dubai, which genuinely is running dry, and much more powerful. The emiratis themselves are fabulously wealthy since the Sheikhs, unlike say the Princes of Saudi Arabi, have distributed much of the proceeds to the people. Breaks and bonuses abound, and social housing for an emirati is a Beverly Hills mansion with free electricity. Moreover the political system is structured around lucrative government positions and state controlled sponsorship schemes, which ensure a healthy portion of the money generated by foreign private businesses flows toward emirati nationals. While for the most part they remain aloof from the humdum of the city, you can see them occasionally – in the lobbies of marbled hotels, or crossing the street in their cotton ghutras, gliding like white wands in the blinding sun.

If you are an emirati, and thus by law and at no extra effort already have the villa, and the pool, and the white Lexus Cruiser, and the sun is shining, the question arises as to what to do with the rest of the money. If you are a Sheikh, for many years the answer has been, 'Not all that much'. It has been (!) 'Hand it over to the investment bankers'. Since striking oil in 1959, Abu Dhabi has been stockpiling surpluses and amassing the world's largest sovereign wealth fund, estimated at some US$750bn. For decades this ocean of petrodollars has been content to do nothing more than lap quietly within a conservative portfolio of what – until recently at least – were considered secure foreign assets. With things thus safely banked, the emiratis have for the most part sat back in their low density luxury settlements, and left the city out to bake.

SHABBY DHABI

Abu Dhabi built its first paved road in 1961 – a time when the city comprised of a fort and a few pearl-fishing huts. Travelling there involved a day's jeep ride across the dunes. The island of Abu Dhabi (roughly the size of Manhattan) was developed over the following decade under Sheikh Zayed, and bears the marks of both the car-town planning era, and Zayed's personal love for England, tree-lining, and all things green. Nomadic Bedouins were gently drawn from the desert into outerlying emirati villages, and provided for with schools, mosques, and the aforementioned mansions. For the downtown, a grid was laid, and a midrise area assembled toward the northern end where now many foreign, often low income workers live, among office blocks, cheap supermarkets, and tube-lit restaurants.

Wandering the streets of Abu Dhabi today, there is little to suggest this is one of the richest cities on earth. In fact, the place is surprisingly shabby. There is much ageing concrete and browning mirrored glass. Many of the buildings are featureless, though a number incorporate into their facades blocky geometric motifs – reminiscent somehow less of Islamic intricacies than factory carpets from the 1970s. Plumbed-in palms articulate the boulevards, the occasional one dead, like the blown bulb on a line of streetlamps. There are frequent six lane roads, with marbled air rising off the tarmac, but behind the buildings are smaller streets, with tatty stores and piled rubbish in steel carts. Occasional openings lead into Pakistani markets, which are crammed with bolts of fabric, rice sacks, and baskets of squashed shoes. Kaftans hang from nails in the wall. Outside again there is a fine dust jacketing on everything. At the corner cafe a few men are seated on plastic chairs, smoking hookahs, and watching the tv on top of the Coke fridge.

There is some construction in evidence, but it is not as intense as one might have expected. For the most part you'd never conceive that a squall of high-end world architecture was about to break across the coastline. It is a testament to the power of architectural renderings, catalogues, and off-plan sales that the actual physical city feels so eldritch – so obsolete even – before anything much has broken ground.

One building however is outstanding, and a offers foretaste of things to come. Unsurprisingly it is the ADIA (Abu Dhabi Investment Authority) headquarters – the offices where the oil money is managed. Designed by KPF and completed in 2007, the tower is a potent symbol of Abu Dhabi's decision to emerge from its monied reclusion and mount the world stage. KPF's Principal David Leventhal describes how the building's folded exterior forms a pair of ‘opening arms’ – welcoming people in – an analogy which the government clients apparently ‘liked a lot’. Also significant is the unapologetically modern aesthetic. Leventhal remebers how a deliberate decision was made to break with the previous quasi-Islamist vocabulary, and instead adopt a language of more abstract contours. The ADIA tower’s reaching arms are almost Abu Dhabi’s opening embrace of the concept of a global metropolis.

2030

The fullness of this embrace only becomes apparent when looking at the 2030 Plan. It is an astonishing document, which architects in Abu Dhabi live with on their desk, occasionally stroking the pages promising tens of thousands of hectares of new build, and cracking their fingers. If anything there is too much work. Yet while the scale is epochal, in contrast to the pandemonium that is Dubai, the detail is meticulous and considered. Infrastructure is thoughtfully planned, and in all cases precedes programmatic development. Density levels are judiciously aligned to public transport options, according to the convition that ‘the best transportation plan is a good land use plan’. The plentiful coastlines of Abu Dhabi’s natural island formation are exploited to preclude reckless landforming. A distaste for ‘undifferentiated urban sprawl’ and a strong pedestrian focus, permeate all aspects of the plan, as does an ambitious environmental theme.

This last is potentially the most questionable, but Evenden insists that it is ‘just as viable to be green in the desert as anywhere else – in fact more so because you have the solar resource.’ Desalination and cooling are the heavy elements, but then major gains can be made with water efficiency and passive design techniques: ‘there are challenges, but that means that as an architect you have to work harder.’ Indeed Evenden’s assessment of the ‘groundbreaking’ zero carbon Masdar Development, and the ‘unprecendented’ levels of support, leads to his assertion leaps are being made in Abu Dhabi which would be quite unthinkable in the UK. ‘For Foster & Partners, our greatest projects are coming out of Abu Dhabi’.

The springboard for these leaps is of course an extension of the terrifically elastic sovereign funds. US$14 billion was made available up front for Masdar, at which point all sorts of things suddenly become a lot more possible. Likewise large petrodollar injections are fuelling the cultural projects, as well as the leisure, business, and infrastructural developments. In fact, in a context where the state is in control of all of the land, as well as being a if not the major investor in each new district of the city, it becomes increasingly unclear what part of this globalised Abu Dhabi is in any way private.

The first thing to note is that huge as the sums involved are to architects, they are comparitively reasonable to oilmen. At US$200m for example, Sheikh Khalifa could, if he chose, buy dozens of Gehry Guggenheims a year. In a sense it is not so much to pay for a building which will categorically change the nature of the city. Indeed against Abu Dhabi's reserves, both of cash and oil, creating a global metropolis is distinctly affordable. Secondly, after decades of return-driven global equity investing, Abu Dhabi has a keen business sense, and is by no means uncritically bank-rolling its development. All projects are justified on a commercial basis: the cultural centres are evaluated against projected tourism revenues, and Evenden asserts that environmental measures are all subjected to rigorous financial discipline. What the wealth of Abu Dhabi facilitates is a next level of ambition in terms of real estate investment and coordination; not a leap into loss-making, or what in the West would be called government spending. The private sector comes in as a co-investor on the terms and according to the plans of the state.

This peculiar hybrid of monumental government intervention with for-profit aims infiltrates every level of project-work in Abu Dhabi, leading to what Reinier de Graf describes as 'the complete merger between business and politics'. Lynton Jones interprets the position of an Emirati Sheikh as something akin to a CEO – restructuring a company with the aim of diversifying revenue streams, reinvesting profits in capacity, taking on new staff (immigration), tunnelling money into research and development (educational and scientific institutions) etc. The conflation of public and private interests and activities allows for strong partnerships, and for the seamless acceleration of processes. And for all the apparent excess or craziness of Abu Dhabi, there is an underlying congruency to its actions much akin to a company operating in alignment with its core aims. Considering Abu Dhabi's position as a premier global energy business, it makes sense that it is interested in new energy technologies, and is investing in initiatives like Masdar, and a Science and Technology Institute focused on renewable generation. Similarly, given the emiratis' considerable experience in leisure and the international luxury market from the consumer end, the move to focus on tourism and to capture some of that supply is equally cogent. The drive toward cultural tourism in particular is made explicit by Barry Lord, cultural consultant for Saadiyat island: 'cultural tourists are wealthier, older, more educated, and they spend more. From an economic view, this makes sense.'

But the more corporate and joined-up the Abu Dhabi approach appears, the more it inspissates a sense of nausea. The 2030 Plan in particular is almost too smooth, with its noiseless allocation of uses and mixed uses, and its solicitously programmed environments. The deliberacy with which the cultural areas are separated out from the government areas and the business areas may make usefully themed locations for tourists, and yet it forecloses the dynamic possibility of creative spaces scattered throughout the city, and embebbed within its active tissue. What would London be like if you gathered up the Tate, the Royal Opera House, the National Gallery, the British Museum et al., and dumped them out on the Isle of Dogs? Barry Lord's observation in particular provokes a repulsively neutered vision of monied geriatrics shuffling through air conditioned galleries, sipping desalinated water, and eating antibiotics and hydroponic tomatoes.

As much as anything this sentiment however betrays a deep-seated western malaise with actual planning, and even a crisis of confidence in the city itself. So much of what urbanists dislike about the Abu Dhabi Global Metropolis is that it is a pure piece of urban design. This says little for our belief in urban designers. Unsurprisingly, those architects and planners actively involved in Abu Dhabi tend to be imbued with an almost messianic enthusiasm. The levels of money, support, and the desert upon which they draw create unique conditions, and facilitate otherwise impossible projects. The promises are enormous: technological breakthroughs, and enormous viewing spaces which could redefine how artists approach their work. Whether or not you think anything true or worthwhile will come of it depends on your faith in the concept of a host of global experts inventing urbanism.

ONLY ALLAH IS PERFECT

Abu Dhabi has answers – at least on paper – for almost any question asked of it. However one intractable crease remains. This is the East / West division, which could either breathe life into the city, or destabilise it completely.

By the standards of the Middle East, the UAE is extremely liberal and Westernised. At the same time, it is an inveterately Arab city. Already questions are mounting regarding the display of nudes in the Guggenheim and Louvre gallery spaces, and no one seems quite sure how this will play out. On a social level, the potential for collision between sober Arab decorum and the kinds of buccaneering Westerners who jump on a plane and head out to the UAE is considerable. July's British sex on the beach in Dubai incident may offer a foretaste of incipient clashes. I in turn was shocked to find on display in the Abu Dhabi Cooperative Supermarket a book entitled 'The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem'.

Were the US to invade Iran, or the situation in Israel to flare up, things in Abu Dhabi could become, in the words of Reinier de Graf, 'very, very tricky'. At the same time, friction between the two cultures, and indeed within the melting pot of nationalities that comes with an 85% immigrant population, is Abu Dhabi's most promising spark.

In Islam only Allah can create perfection. Anything from the hand of man is sure to carry a mistake in the pattern. It is the flaw that makes it human.

NOT ONLY WESTERN BANKS ARE IMPERFECT

The implications of the credit crunch for Abu Dhabi are, inevitably, intricate and involved. The seizing up of credit in world markets is strangling international investment, and developers are gasping. This is exaccerbated in the UAE where banks are heavily leveraged, frequently giving credit to either side of the development equation – i.e. debt financing to developers, and mortgage lending to buyers. It's a delicately empty structure, and liable to collapse. Large sketched swathes of Dubai are rolling themselves back up already.

Abu Dhabi has the greater stability of its oil wealth, and a significant bulwark of money to shore up projects if credit from elsewhere threatens to fail. However most of the money is still tied up overseas on international stock markets, where inevitably it will have taken a pummelling. The falling dollar hardly helps. In addition to this the price of oil has dropped alarmingly, cutting back the promise of swollen oil revenues. It would be a mistake though to overestimate the importance of this: the 2030 plan was drawn up over a time when oil was still less than US$70 a barrel (less than it is now), and the recent price spike into the US$130+ region has been very recent, and very spikey.

A futher negative however may come from a falling off of the demand side – in short, who is going to buy Abu Dhabi's luxury new homes, stay in its exclusive new hotels, or rent out offices in its sparkling new financial centre, in a time of recession? One of the measured wisdoms of the 2030 plan is its commitment to maintain a 'carefully monitored balance between the supply and demand of real estate', and to avoid a 'sudden cataclysmic burst of development'. Abu Dhabi may at some point have to sign a big cheque to bail out Dubai, but it is not going to trip over itself. At least a slowing down of the pace of development seems likely.

When I went to Abu Dhabi I flew Etihad, the UAE airline. Sitting on the runway waiting to return to London an announcement came over the tannoi: 'Somebody has misplaced a diamond ring in the waiting area in the gate before boarding. If anyone has misplaced a diamond ring could they please alert a member of cabin crew.' There wasn't much sign of movement. If you are an emirati, you can afford to lose a diamond ring or two. But if several disappear all at the same time, you may be inclined to become a little more cautious.

Adrian Hornsby 14.10.08

A predetermined ‘Sand Belt’ limits expansion, and staunches ‘unending differentiated sprawl’. At all times there is a careful sensitivity to the need for an ‘intricate urban fabric of mixed use’ and ‘human-scaled interconnected streets’. Following the rule of ‘the largest amount of smaller options rather than the smallest amount of larger options’ freeways and big roads are minimised in favour of a finer self-regulating grid.