

The London Consortium  
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### Dubai: Self-help for those wanting to build a 21st Century City

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Aiming to initiate interdisciplinary intellectual debate about paradoxes of contemporary culture, Static presents contributions from an international team of academics, artists and cultural practitioners.

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*What are the lessons to be learned from Dubai's new world, and how will the future of urban living be shaped by them?*

The world's tallest building isn't going up in Shanghai or Beijing, but in the United Arab Emirates' city of Dubai. For the last 15 years, this former British desert colony has been the site of a seemingly unstoppable boom in tourism and business, fuelled by Arab oil and global ambition bordering on hubris. The population has increased from 69,000 in 1969 to 1 million, which includes people with 203 nationalities living side-by-side. The city clearly follows the dictum that nobody remembers who comes second. Dubai is home to the world's largest marina and its biggest motorway intersection and will soon house the world's biggest shopping centre. At this rate, it will soon break the record for the location with most world breaking records.

Accordingly, it is one of the world's largest and most intense building sites: one eight hour construction shift dovetails into the next, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, silenced only for Friday prayers. And things aren't only being built upwards. By 2010, Dubai expects 15 million tourists to check into its 400 hotels and 2000 restaurants. Tourists want beaches; therefore, the 45km of natural seafront is being upgraded by 1500km of artificial shoreline in a series of jaw-dropping island projects that make fantasies concrete reality.

Shiny, new, over-scaled, scaleless, pompous, obscene, tasteless, but very real, Dubai is Utopian without ever using the word. It's visionary, but without the annoying obligation to be revolutionary.

Sure, part of me that feels that the "Dubai mission" should be denounced as a bling-bland and deeply superficial vision, one that equates size with sexiness, like those 1980s testosterone turbo cars seen in *Magnum P.I.* or *Miami Vice*. Perhaps we should chide Dubai for forgetting (or, worse still, ignoring) lessons Western Europe can provide about the way in which a city's history must be layered over time, vertically, as though history were geology. If Dubai wanted to prove its liberal lifestyle leanings, it would see itself in the honourable tradition of the Enlightenment: lots of museums, libraries and other symbols of democratic representation. But is that the ultimate Idea of the City for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

If you stand on Sheikh Zayed Road – perhaps the best barometer there is for measuring Dubai's transformation from desert to downtown – all you see is an endless line-up of multi-coloured mirror glass skyscrapers: a city reflecting its own reflections, *ad infinitum*. Mirror glass is what architecture becomes when it wants to say something, but doesn't know what. Is there a more potent image of emptiness?

Yet there is a genuine attempt to construct the definition of a city in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that is fascinating. Does Dubai simply press rewind? I don't think so. Unlike Berlin, which longs for a 19<sup>th</sup> century past it once had but probably will never be able to recuperate or re-create, Dubai isn't hankering for a lost past – mainly because it never really had one. It is desperately, defiantly and daringly looking for a destiny that draws images of the past, present and future into one jaw-dropping synthesis. There's no lamentation. No remorse.

So, if, for a moment, we look at Dubai as seriously as it looks at itself, might we discover tactics and strategies that signal new paradigms for cities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – for "Cities from Zero." Put it another way: if Dubai were to write a self-help book for other non-places desperate for a leg-up onto the global stage, what might it suggest as "12 Critical Steps to Sudden Success"?

### 1. Be geographically remote

A location stuck between scorched desert on one side and sea on the other may not sound ideal as a site to build a city on. But Dubai turns apparent deficiencies into positive assets. Advantage one of a *tabula rasa* that was traipsed over by Bedouin tribes a hundred years ago is that there is no built history to contend with, no foundational forebears, no symbolic origins to tiptoe around. Advantage two is that there is nothing to limit growth. Like the fastest-growing city in the United States, Las Vegas, Dubai has virginal space to expand into as and when it wants to. So far, it plans to do so in both directions, devouring desert and securing the sea.

### 2. Already possess significant wealth

Dubai struck oil in the 1960s, but even then knew its supplies were relatively tiny next to those of neighbouring Emirate Abu Dhabi. Dubai's gas and oil will last for 120 more years, but its oil is set to dry up by 2020. But who cares? By then it will have translated 50 years of oil lubricated wealth into an ever-expanding portfolio of industries. According to the Director General of Economic Development in Dubai, "When compared to \$6.2 billion in 2000 and \$4.4 billion for the year 1996, 2005's GDP of \$13.6 billion puts the accumulated annual growth of Dubai's economy in the last decade at among the highest rate of growth in the world."

### 3. The future city should be envisioned from above

In the Nakheel Showroom, tucked away behind high-security gates and set within flowing fountains and fauna, there is a meticulously Photoshopped aerial image of the Dubai that will take shape over the next 20 years. Sprouting off its coastline are three palm-shaped artificial islands, a crescent-shaped city for 750,000 people and an archipelago of islands known as *The World*. Inland, there is a "city" planned in the shape of a falcon and another as a chessboard with 32 64-storey buildings for pieces. Everything is part of the big, planned picture. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, Dubai's recently appointed Emir and visionary architect of change, is said to be a keen pilot. From his floating vantage point, the logic of Dubai's parts combines with a vision of the new city whole. This perspective – aloft, perpendicular to the quotidian ground – is an ancient, even celestial one for urban generation. Order once again comes from above.

### 4. Your natural climate is no barrier to the ecologies you can create

In December, Dubai can average 29 degrees Celsius. By Summer, it gets as hot as 45 degrees. Its average annual rainfall is just 30cm. But that's no reason not to have a rotating mountain that is snow capped all year long. Or a *Waterworld* with a 400m long galleon ship, or an artificially cultivated green belt strung around an artificially dug river. It's the logic of air conditioning and heating extended and amplified into a magic that can conjure up every ecology humans have ever coveted.

### 5. People love "History"

There are three tenses in Dubai: new-new, new-old and old-new. When Bastikiya – an "old" neighbourhood from the early 1900s with single-storey houses and courtyards – was being destroyed in the mid-1990s, someone evidently made the shrewd observation that 'Tourists like *old* stuff, so we need to keep some history. Let's re-build Bastikiya!' And so they did. It may feel like it's just been removed from its shrinkwrap, but its narrow streets nevertheless invoke a more innocent time, counter the strident skyscraper-lust that holds everywhere else. Next to the Burj Dubai, the slick 800m tower that will be the world's tallest building when complete, is another development by the same company, Emaar Developments. *Old Town* will be mediaeval and castellated in its looks and boast bubbling fountains and

underground parking for every resident. In other parts of Dubai, English suburbia, American ranch-life and Arabian Summer Palaces will all exist and provide copy-and-paste memories. And *The Lost City* will not be miraculously found but built from scratch.

## **6. A city should consist of many cities, villages, and worlds**

Everything – from the smallest scrap of site to the largest planned development – is given an ennobling name that evokes a village, a city, a land or a world: KNOWLEDGE VILLAGE, DUBAILAND, GIFTLAND, EASTLAND, HUMANITARIAN CITY, MARITIME CITY, TEXTILE CITY, MEDIA CITY, INTERNET CITY, HEALTH CARE CITY, INDUSTRIAL CITY, THE LOST CITY, CITY OF GOLD, WATERWORLD, WORLD GOLD COUNCIL, THE WORLD. Such appellations transcend locality and nationality. Each “–Land” or “–World” is now the summation of the idea by which it is prefixed, part of a new and absolute index of place-identities. From here, pedestrians and motorists traversing Dubai become everyday travelers charting a strange, scaleless geography.

## **7. Invite the super-rich to visit and move-in first**

A room at the Burj Arab hotel costs \_1000 per night. Its “seven star” status is just clever P.R. hyperbole that coined to convey its dedication to the luxury lifestyle. Each suite comes with its own butler, gold and chrome fittings are standard, and Michael Jackson drops in but doesn’t stay over. David Beckham and his English football teammates were said to be some of the first celebrities to buy in Dubai. Now Donald Trump, Gianni Versace and Giorgio Armani have decided to invest with their own branded hotels. Tax exemptions, perfect weather, golf courses, a dotting and endless service class and a ruling class that exemplifies ostentatious wealth make Dubai the new gated attraction for the world’s most visibly affluent. There’s nothing filthy about being rich here. Monaco should be scared.

## **8. Architecture must be skin deep (and that’s not superficial thinking)**

At Dubai Marinas, 200 towers are in construction. Each one is cast in concrete. The collective effect (especially at night) is of a coven of dark figures conspiring to attack. But their dull, atonal physiques will soon be transformed. In Dubai, architectural individuality comes in cladding options. Applied like make-up for buildings, cladding comes flat-packed and is stuck onto the concrete. Bronzed steel, aqua blue glazing or pink granite finish? Instant differentiation! What’s better still is that when the building is sold to a new owner, the cladding can be peeled off and replaced with a newer pattern. Modernist rubric said that the outside should be a function of the inside; Dubai, however, declares that the two have nothing in common, that they live parallel lives.

## **9. Install an alternative to participatory democracy**

Is it coincidence that the world’s fastest growing economies — China and Dubai – both eschew participatory democracies and espouse a hybrid form of state-controlled free market capitalism? Both the Chinese Communist government and the United Arab Emirates’ ruling tribal family believe the minds of the select few should map national visions for the many. Once decided upon, plans for the future are mobilized instantly into direct action. Any resistance to the vision goes unheard and is therefore useless. While Cities like London and Rome are often held hostage by their history and those who preserve it, Dubai encounters no such resistance to its grand strokes. Accountability comes only in the form of guaranteeing a lifestyle good enough for everyone to sacrifice their electoral representation.

## 10. Designate controlled zones of exceptional liberalism

At its heart, Dubai is an autocratic Islamic state that closely monitors its media and its citizens. If this were its primary public face, it would hardly make the best place in which to bask on the beach in a bikini or to run CNN's Middle East operations from. One of the first signs of legislative fine-tuning came when it allowed non-nationals temporary citizenship in order to buy certain new properties. From thereon, critical 'Freezones' were set up as legal lacunae exempted from the Emirate's primary social, economic and media orders. In Media City, now home to BBC, Al Jazeera and CNN, there is no interference from the Dubai authorities in any of the transmissions. At Internet City, you can surf through any areas of the web you wish, a privilege not granted to the rest of Dubai's residents. And the hotels that line the coast merrily serve alcohol to the skimpily dressed designer-clad crowd, where the chances of encountering an Eastern European prostitute are considerably higher than anywhere else. Freedom must be served to those that are used to it.

## 11. Import an endless supply of labourers and service class from abroad

Some 250,000 laborers are building Dubai every day of every year. Most originate from Pakistan or India, and now, increasingly, China. In addition to the construction workers, recognisable by their blue jumpsuits, hundreds of thousands of other immigrants will form the service foundation for the expanding hospitality industry. Labourers live in the forlornly named "Labour Camps" of Al Quoz and Sunapur, gated ghettos unmarked on any of the grand plans of Dubai. Non-unionised, bereft of any representational recourse to workers' rights, and housed in questionable living conditions, the throng that is building Dubai is in a semi-voluntary state of human subjugation. Call it an abject system and those who work within it will tell you that here, at least, they earn money that would be unthinkable in their homelands. Such relativism is also the ultimate argument put by those shepherding this globally mobile workforce.

## 12. Re-build the World – only Better than it Ever was

"Our World is not a political world," explains one of the representatives from Nakheel, the company responsible for laying out 300 man-made islands in the shape of the World map. Countries and states are on sale, at prices ranging from \$6m to \$40m, for which you get a lump of sand and permission to start your own micro-nation. Elsewhere in Dubai, plans are afoot for a 1:1 scale Eiffel Tower, the Pyramids of Giza, and a perennially wintry Snowdome. It's going to be the world's Best Of, a Greatest Hits of cherished geographies and icons. By rebuilding the world, Dubai can sieve away the danger, the dirt and the dross. It's like *Pimp My World*.

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To repeat: there's no lamentation, no remorse. Maybe that's the troubling thing for many academics and historians of Western Europe. Dubai's guiltless and shameless thrust forward is not weighed down by an adherence to anyone's past. The absence of any anxiety is in itself troubling to us. Where we in the West see huge post-modern quotation marks around everything that happens there, Dubai sees none. It sees the authentic production of the "New," only bigger, and better, than anywhere else. Perhaps the doom-mongers are wrong, and Dubai isn't a freakish one-off, but the very first of very many 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cities from Zero.

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