

WIPPEL, STEFFEN, BROMBER, KATRIN, STEINER, CHRISTIAN und KRAWIETZ, BIRGIT (Eds.): *Under Construction. Logics of Urbanism in the Gulf Region*. Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate Verlag, 2014, 336 S., ISBN 978-1-4724-1288-1, € 70,00

Analysing the recent urban developments in and around the Gulf region the 24 authors of this weighty tome are almost universally critical of most aspects of what they see “under the magnifying glass” (Freitag). This book is the preliminary result of an ongoing interdisciplinary and interregional research agenda of the *Zentrum Vorderer Orient* (ZMO) in Berlin, whose director, Ulrike Freitag, wrote the Foreword. All four editors have had an association with this institution as resident and field researchers over six years. In 2010 they organised a conference at the ZMO, reaching out to a further 20 academics, specialised in diverse disciplines such as geography, architecture, urban studies, culture management, economics or Islamic Studies.

The results of this conference are published as 21 articles in this book. It is divided into four parts, of which the first one ‘The Politics and Economy of Infrastructure and Architecture’ sets the tone by highlighting what most of the contributors see from their different angles as an essentially capitalist agenda for the recent phase of urban development in the Gulf region. The opening contribution by Christian Steiner demonstrates how and why he and the other authors became so mesmerized by Dubai. He refers most frequently to Dubai as the prime example of the way in which the accumulation of iconic architecture created, what he calls the ‘hyperrealisation of urban spaces’. According to Steiner such ‘symbolic capital’ enhances the competition for instant global recognition. Furthermore “the collection of enterprises and banks, which are substantially owned and controlled by the Government of Dubai or jointly with the Ruler” (as shown in a graph of ‘Dubai Incorporated’ on p. 19) also “enhances the socio-political legitimization of the ruling elite [...]” (p. 28). Other authors (for instance George Katadrytis’ series of images called ‘Dubai: Telegenic Fantasies’) also focus on the observation that Dubai is leading in government-driven building of ‘destinations’.

The author of the article ‘Masdar City: A Critical Retrospection’ bemoans the fact that the world is still hoping for the promised zero carbon, zero waste city to become a reality. The architect Felix Sommerland delves into the realm of the “virtual, computer-generated world [...] and the [...] promises sold (which are) virtually impossible to keep” (p. 91). Using the example of the Palm Dubai, the author posits that what is designed for and sold to a chain of anonymous or virtual customers is completely exchangeable. The building is not meant to correspond with a specific site and its given micro-environment; it could equally be placed anywhere in American suburbia. According to Sommerland, the creation of space for people to use as individuals has been sacrificed to chasing ‘emotions’ evoked by references to certain images. Iconic names of architects and the complete computer-animation of 3D images are there to serve the parameters of the real estate market.

This observation dominates the second part of the volume entitled ‘Images and Iconic Brands: Constructing Markets and Identity’. The phenomenon of ‘simulation preceding and replacing reality’ in postmodern cities is echoed in the article by Steffen Wippel on ‘Port and Tourism Development in Oman’. He describes the many government-driven ITCs (Integrated Tourism Complexes). Located on pristine sites on the coasts or in the mountains far from traditional settlements, these gated communities – consisting of globally conforming housing and hotels, air-conditioned shopping malls, golf courses, other leisure facilities and some simulated local heritage – are unlikely to become home for the farmers and fisher folk of the region or the jobless university graduates. Oman’s impressive port developments focus on container and transshipment traffic, which is not expected to serve the hinterland. This author, too, uses Dubai as a reference for judging the achievements or ambitions of Oman in the fields of tourism and of shipping.

Qatar’s determination to get away from the Lonely Planet’s (2000) verdict of being ‘the dullest place on earth’ spurred the government to look for alternatives to be noticed among the oil-rich countries of the region. Learning from the mistakes of others, the decision-makers in Doha wanted to “establish and communicate a clear cultural identity and to create an urban landscape that is more rooted in its local tradition” (p. 79). In her contribution Nadine Scharfenort portrays endeavours such as the revitalization of the

Suq Waqif and even Qatar's use of the FIFA World Cup for its branding as a chance to "present itself as a modern, open-minded and thriving location and to gain worldwide attention" (p. 83).

The use of sport for destination-branding by Qatar and other Gulf cities is critically analysed by Katrin Bromber. She singles out Qatar's efforts to systematically plan for the realisation of the slogan of 'sports for all' and the flagship sports academy ASPIRE originally modelled on an academy in Cologne. But the author doubts that in an environment with "clearly demarcated social boundaries" the institution's emphasis on leadership training from an early age and the systematic search for footballing talent from among half a million boys all over Africa (p. 122) will contribute to positive branding. She is equally sceptical about the social values for Dubai of its planned 'Sports City', when it is just a replica of other iconic destinations – providing a privileged sporting lifestyle for mostly global residents, who can afford to share the superb facilities with famous athletes, trainers and wintering football clubs. Oman is seen as an exception, where cycling (Tour of Oman) and sailing were developed from the idea of using a race as an educational project. Long-distance sailing events evoke the maritime tradition and help to brand Oman.

The ubiquitous falcon as heraldic symbol is meant to represent the noblest sentiments, which the Gulf nationals inherited from their desert-dwelling ancestors. However, Birgit Krawietz deconstructs as myths the rhetoric surrounding this sport on many levels. To begin with, hunting with falcons for subsistence has turned into a high-end status symbol, which only the very rich can afford. To hunt with one's falcon, the owners have to travel to countries outside the Gulf, where the main prey, the *hubara* bustard, can still exist. These hunting expeditions are entirely a man's world. Talking about 'neo-falconry' the author continues to interpret the "iconicity [...]" as a forceful statement of Gulf Arab hegemony that, at least symbolically, outweighs the threatening degree of foreign influence [...]" (p. 141).

Two authors of articles in the third part entitled 'Art Production and Exhibitions: A Critical Engagement with Urban Developments' manage to find rather more positive angles to their subjects. Writing about Saadiyat Cultural District, Brigitte Dumortier plays down the notion that Abu Dhabi has taken a 'cultural turn' to artificially reinvent the emirate's social and emotional fabric. Seeing that

the lion share of the island is dedicated to property development, she puts the spurt of museum construction into perspective and sees it as "an investment in diversification (which) [...] might serve the building of a knowledge society", thanks to the chance to attract international elites (p. 187). Bruno Maquart predicts that far from being a replica, the Louvre Abu Dhabi will "invent its own artistic and cultural personality" (p. 197). In the piece entitled 'A Vision Becomes an Institution' by Joachim Gierlich, the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) in Doha is praised as successfully creating a platform for masterpieces of Islamic art and meeting the highest standards of museum architecture. But he questions whether, this institution has also found its own way outside the standards set by Western directors and curators. And where is the link to contemporary Islamic art and what are the cultural connections to the museum of Qatari heritage?

Under the subtitle for part three 'A Critical Engagement with Urban Developments', one discovers the four editors' prime focus for the project. Here they interpret (or re-interpret?) the texts, maps, graphs and photos of conference contributors, whose agenda was an ideology-based attack on the celebration of a "self-image of globalized art" in an exploitative world, which tolerates "that the authoritarian system is the ideal partner in a so-called free market" (p. 213). Originally conceived before the economic downturn of 2008, these two contributions are highly critical of the instrumentalisation of art, iconic architecture, sport and leisure to maximise capitalist gains from government-conceived public/private real estate developments. As a table on p. 225 demonstrates, the Dubai blueprint for such successful investments was spread by at least six real estate construction companies outside the UAE to many middle-eastern countries and even Russia and China.

Part four of the book entitled 'Dubai-Style Elsewhere: Plagiarizing or Transforming the Gulf Model' is therefore dedicated to the description of a number of examples, where this particular model of investment in gated communities or assemblages of high-rises – offering a mix of business, hotels, touristic leisure, high-end living, and art – is replicated on waterfronts and river banks of cities across the Middle East and North Africa. These case-studies address 'Models of Urban Diffusion' as "Gulfication" (p. 271) in Cairo, Morocco, Tunisia, Damascus, Khartoum and Nouakchott.

At the time of the construction in the early 2000s of the Burj al Arab, the Palm and the World, western media started to take note of the extraordinary type of urbanisation happening in the Gulf – in particular in Dubai. Why do we not have similarly audacious projects in the west? Then the same media's 'Schadenfreude' over the economic downturn after 2008, and a general assessment of the meaning of what was going on in the Gulf after 9/11 set in. This may have motivated the ZMO's research project and the publication of these 21 conference contributions, using the double meaning of 'Under Construction' as title for the book. The authors of this book all take different angles in a quest to counter this earlier mindless praise in western media of the 'visions' of man-made palms, islands and marinas.

The above quotations from several passages in this volume have made it abundantly clear that all the authors are highly critical of what they see as capitalist forces behind the recent urbanisation in the Gulf and beyond. Their ideological bias causes some of them to repeat certain mantras, e. g. maintaining that this concept for urbanisation is based solely on slavery. A more differentiated use of statistics and engagement with history would take into account the centuries-old relationship between the people of the Indian subcontinent and the Gulf. Also, the contributors ignore – or maybe do not want to be confused by – the historical evidence of earlier urban developments in the Gulf. Even though the latter have also not come about through the decision-taking of democratically elected institutions, examples from the 1950s (Kuwait, Qatar), 1960s (Bahrain's Isa Town) or 1970s (low-cost housing and infrastructure throughout the UAE) show that the society's leaders initially focused development planning on the needs of the local population. It was these local individuals, who were themselves then empowered to use urban land, which they obtained from the authorities, to become landlords of villas and high-rises and thus cement their ever increasing role in the local economy.

The reviewer would find it impossible not to comment on the strangeness and ubiquity of newly coined words, particularly in the introductory chapter written jointly by all four editors. What could one substitute for "[...] compared with Dubai's *velocity*, other *extremely resolute cities* [...]" (p. 2) or the "[...] *indexicality* for a specific socio-economic project" or "[...] a *quasi-transcendental* or, at least, *instinctual* core [...]" (p. 7)? Elsewhere ex-

pressions like *hyperreality*, and the *financialization of the planning* must be meant to make one stop and think (Italics by the reviewer).

In keeping with the predominant topic of probing the durability of an 'iconic' lifestyle, which informs much of the recent urbanisation in the Gulf, the volume in hand is itself expensively produced. But the glossy paper should not detract from its more important qualities, namely that it is well provided with all the apparatus to be expected of a work, which has been so long in the making and benefitted from expertise in a number of different disciplines. Hence, each article's focal point is aptly supported by many pertinent b/w or colour photographs or diagrams, graphs, plates, maps and tables – all attributed and otherwise documented. The contributions have footnotes and detailed bibliographies. There are CVs of the 24 authors at the front and an index at the back. Thus, in spite of its ideological bent, the book serves as a comprehensive reflection on the Gulf States' changing position in a globalized world.

Autorin: Dr. Frauke Heard-Bey, ret., Centre for Documentation and Research/National Archive, P.O. box 26696, Abu Dhabi, E-Mail: fraukeh@gmail.com