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Dubai What Cosmopolitan City?

MOHAMMAD MASAD

For much of its recorded history, Dubai has been recognized as a cosmopolitan city. Sixty years ago, the late traveller and photographer Wilfred Thesiger remarked that Dubai's suqs were "crowded with many races," including Arab townsmen, Beduins, slaves, Baluchis, Persians, Indians, Kashgai tribesmen, and Somalis.¹ The Dubai of today is a far cry from that of the mid-twentieth century. The city has been totally transformed into a gigantic metropolis, growing at breathtaking speed and attracting a deluge of guest workers, investors, and tourists from around the world.

The unprecedented growth of Dubai would have been impossible without foreign labour. Reliable numbers are hard to come by, but most sources estimate that expatriates from around the globe now account for more than ninety percent of the city residents, dwarfing the local Emiratis to a small minority. As the city grows, its cosmopolitan nature expands and intensifies reflected in such areas as dress, food, language, religion, and other aspects of lifestyle filtering through everyday life.

However, Dubai often finds itself caught between its carefully crafted and branded image as a city of harmonious living and a global hub of business and tourism, and its reputation as a harshly segregated city living off the indentured labour of exploited Asian workers. These perceptions have generated a lively debate about the nature of the Dubai experiment and attracted both praise and condemnation. For many, Dubai is a success story, regardless of the reasons and costs. The city's openness for example to bold ideas in designing urban spaces is seen by some as an indicator of Dubai's unique place as "the prototype of the 21st century," making it into a designer's paradise.² Others however dismiss Dubai as an unsustainable experiment of a vast gated community, rooted in mindless consumption and economic injustice.³

Much of the unsympathetic views about Dubai seems to emanate from a preconceived rejection of capitalist consumerism. But to see Dubai through this prism only is problematic and ill-informed. It is a gross simplification to describe Dubai as a gated community. The relative freedom of movement within the city and the millions of visitors and newly-recruited workers constantly streaming into it are hardly signs of a gated city. It would be more accurate to say that Dubai is a generally open city-state of relatively gated communities. Similarly, it is hard to believe that Dubai is a mirage. The city has been around for longer than many western cities; and its growth, regardless of how it is characterized should not render it less real than Monte Carlo, Las Vegas, or Singapore.

The social architecture of Dubai is premised on a sharp division and separation of the main three communities: local Emiratis, western, Arab and subcontinental expatriates, and South Asian workers. These communities are generally differentiated by their civic rights, socio-economic status, residential location, lifestyle priorities, and cultural identities. Some of the spheres of separation are the result of the kinds of jobs people have and how much money they earn; others exist by virtue of the natural gravitation of different groups of people towards communities and localities that reflect their national or cultural identity. Consequently, these groups enjoy different sets of choices and freedoms.

Citizens

At the top of the social pyramid is the national Emirati community, also known as the nationals or the locals. Statistically, this is a shrinking minority, comprising no more than ten percent of Dubai's inhabitants; it is also the only group that enjoys the UAE citizenship with all the

Dubai's phenomenal development is celebrated by some as a model of cosmopolitan living, and downplayed by others as a non-sustainable urbanism rooted in exploitation. Whatever the truth is, the mix of peoples and lifestyles in Dubai is remarkable, as expatriates from all over the world move there to live and work. Yet this cosmopolitanism is tempered by dynamics of segregation and the exclusion of the majority expatriate population from civic life. This article examines these conflicting faces of cosmopolitan living in Dubai.

rights and privileges that come with it, including substantial governmental subsidies and a distinct preferential treatment. Most Emiratis live in separate or detached houses, usually up-scale walled villas, in neighbourhoods where similar Emirati families find living more comfortable; for example certain parts of Jumeira, Um Suqeim, and Garhoud. Though occasionally expatriate families may live nearby, even next door, meaningful interaction between locals and foreigners is extremely limited and often nonexistent. However, the mutual need and routine interaction can promote shared interests and also create mutual respect, understanding, acceptance, and sometimes, even friendship.

Increasing numbers of Emiratis for example are sending their children to private schools where they will have an opportunity for daily interaction with other children and teens from around the world. These young Emiratis are full participants in the kind of multi-cultural experience that is virtually impossible in the regular public schools system, where students are exclusively nationals (occasionally mixed with a limited number of children of Arab expatriates). Other areas of interaction include higher education and private sector employment. Many young Emiratis, including women, attend colleges and universities, some of which are open to all students, with western curricula, and a multi-national staff and faculty teaching in English. Once graduated, many of these Emiratis choose to work in private businesses, where, unlike working in the government sector, they get to intermingle daily with colleagues and customers from around the globe.

These changes in education and employment are increasing the chances of breaking the divide between the national and expatriate communities. To some degree, this trend is the result of the policy of "emiratization," whereby private businesses in some sectors (such as banking and financial services) are encouraged through incentives (or required by law) to hire local citizens in specific jobs. This process is also driven by a growing sense of frustration among many locals that their country is practically being run at many levels by expatriate managers and workers. The sharp increase in the cost of living in Dubai has also pushed a significant number of Emirati families into a position of greater financial need. Thus more nationals are now actively seeking private employment.

But despite these profound changes, the majority of the working nationals are absorbed into government and public sectors, if they do not own or co-own their own businesses. This is understandable, given the work environment in this sector and the governmental policy of comprehensive subsidies for its employees. Very few private employers are willing to pay the kinds of salaries and benefits afforded to locals in the public sector, assuming they are eligible to work there in the first place. While some governmental sectors have been almost completely nationalized, with most employment (save for service jobs and manual labour) in the hands of Emiratis, other ones, such as education, are still heavily dependent on expatriates. If anything, the need for larger influxes of expatriate labour is all the more urgent as the city grows exponentially and the government has a hard time filling in the expanding job market with trained nationals.

Some of the more interesting daily cosmopolitan experiences happen in the old Dubai, namely, Deira and Bur Dubai, home to some of the poorest of the nationals and long-term residents; mostly people who came to the city generations ago from other parts of Arabia, Iran, or South Asia and continued to live in Dubai without necessarily becoming fully naturalized. This area is also a favorite for transient expa-

triaties with modest income to live and do business. The old city is spatially delineated from its later extensions and other newer neighbourhoods (such as Garhoud, Jumeira, and Mir-dif) where wealthier nationals and comfortable expatriates tend to live. It is also worlds apart from the new Dubai, which is an amalgam of high rises and suburbia with luxury villas and modern apartments, rented or owned by mostly rich and middle class expatriates. Old Dubai is also popular with tourists seeking the experience of the ambience of Dubai as an Oriental city. As a result, this part of Dubai is a thriving cosmopolitan site. There is a much more frequent and genuine interaction among people living there. These localities, for example Ghbeiba and Satwa, have a clear transnational connection evident in the languages spoken, the signs posted, the ethnic restaurants, the many money-exchange and transfer offices, and the games or sports played there.⁴

Expatriates

The bulk of the expatriate population resides in districts outside the old city and in the new Dubai, often described as pretentious, lifeless, and bland cookie-cutter urban spaces. This is partially true, though it tends to romanticize old Dubai and exaggerate the fake urbanism of the new one. The new Dubai communities may have little to show in terms of lively social and cultural activities; but those who live there are real people who come from all over the world, often with families, to make a living. They often live in gated or semi-gated communities, either in small walled compounds or mega developments, and without a clear national or ethnic pattern of residency. The daily interaction of this multi-national and transient population, via neighbourly relations or encounters at clubs, schools, pools, parks, and gyms, contributes to a growing sense of a harmonious cosmopolitan living.

Most recently, those with more invested interest in these communities, such as the long-term expatriate tenants and owners of apartments and townhouses, have started to bind together to improve living conditions for them and their families through initiatives such as recycling programmes, committees tackling pressing issues, beach and desert cleaning campaigns, charity drives, and sports activities. What many of these people have in common, as neighbours, tenants, owners, and parents, is more than just accidentally sharing a space; they also share a growing sense of common interest that opens channels of communication and interaction. Such experiences cannot be dismissed as meaningless.

In addition to social contacts in villa compounds and apartment buildings, other private and public places can be identified as cosmopolitan sites. These include businesses, government offices serving and tending to the needs of expatriates (police stations, immigration and naturalization, municipality), and public places such as shopping malls, clubs, bars, parks, and beaches. Shopping is perhaps the most frequent public activity for many of the Dubai international population. The mix of people, styles, shops, goods, foods, and entertainment facilities and activities in almost all of the city's mega malls is remarkable. While the shopping mall is by definition a shallow and passing experience, in contrast private schools offer the most significant public space for cosmopolitan encounters in Dubai. The bonds of friendship and everyday living created between students (as well as teachers and staff) of these schools is one of the most enduring legacies of cosmopolitan Dubai.

Asian labourers

Asian labourers constitute the largest group of expatriates, but also are the most excluded from the cosmopolitan experience of Dubai. This is the class at the very bottom of the social pyramid and the most invisible and secluded in terms of residence and social life. The bulk of workers live in labour camps, often in squalid living conditions and far away from other residential areas. But this situation is also gradually changing: first, the national and ethnic mix of the labourers themselves is expanding, as Asian workers from more countries, such as China, join the labour force; second, the distance between labour camps and the built up residential and commercial areas is fast disappearing. Now more workers can be seen wandering in shopping malls or walking around residential districts. Living without their families (since they do not earn enough to do that), the workers' everyday life



PHOTO BY MOHAMMAD MASAD, 2008

Shoppers in Dubai's Mall of the Emirates

revolves around work and survival, with little emotional solace or escape. This is still largely an excluded class, where workers have little contact with others outside of their coworkers and superiors.

Other groups of urban nomads are mostly in a better position to nurture transnational identities. For them, the feeling of an outsider is never gone, but the lack of strong or irreplaceable affiliations and belonging combined with an extended residency in the city highlight a sense of connection to Dubai and what it has to offer. The securities of work, good life, harmonious living, safe city, and modern facilities cannot be underestimated, and to the extent Dubai can offer these the bond between city and inhabitants can only get stronger.

Transnational utopia?

Dubai is definitely not a utopia, though it has at its disposal an endless capacity to accommodate everything and anything. The temporariness of most of its inhabitants and the lack of equality in terms of citizenship and residency rights are two conditions that deepen the separation and give rise to tension. To make Dubai a truly modern city that cares for all of its residents and its future, the city has to overcome the root causes that continue to tarnish its reputation. Among these, the severe segregation of its communities, the sub-human conditions of Asian labourers, and the lack of civil society are among the most urgent. Sorting out these problems will propel the rise of an urban cosmopolitan existence that is much more humane and sustainable.

Dubai may not be the ultimate cosmopolitan city, but it can rightfully claim to be more cosmopolitan than other cities in the region. In addition to its history of multi-ethnic living and openness, it is certainly not lacking in diversity, resources, boldness, and fame to make cosmopolitan living much more than a touristic promotion or a skin-deep phenomenon. There is recently some movement in this direction, most notably the changes in property ownership laws, enacted five years ago. These changes create the prospect of a long-term or permanent residency, often in the same buildings or projects, of many thousands of people from around the globe who are seeking property investment or a well-paying job with a modern lifestyle in Dubai. Though extending citizenship to non-Emiratis will probably not be on the horizon for a long time (the country has yet to find closure on

the problem of the *bidoun*, stateless people who claim to be Emiratis but haven't been considered citizens), progress on advancing civic rights, and creating a more equitable system can significantly change social dynamics. How far these changes can go is difficult to ascertain at the moment, but in the meanwhile, more and more people seem to be willing to think of Dubai as a home city and identify with what it represents.

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Notes

1. Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* (Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 1994), 241.
2. George Katodrytis, "Metropolitan Dubai and the Rise of Architectural Fantasy," *Bidoun Magazine*, no. 4 (Spring 2005).
3. Mike Davis, "Fear and Money in Dubai," *New Left Review* 41 (Sept.-Oct. 2006); Ian Parker, "The Mirage," *The New Yorker*, 17 Oct. 2005.
4. Yasser Elsheshtawy, "Transitory Sites: Mapping Dubai's 'Forgotten' Urban Public Spaces," *LASTE 206, Tenth LASTE Conference: Hyper-Tradition*, Bangkok, Thailand (2006).