Desert field of dreams
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Essay

In the distance, the rows of high-rise towers on Dubai’s infamous Sheikh Zayed Road glitter; ornaments on the edge of an immense plain. Closer, giant boxes – elaborate light-fringed shopping centres and business precincts – rise out of the dust. From the back of the Mercedes, we seem to be looping, the long curvature of roads crossing back on themselves like a tame sideshow ride that still manages to make me queasy. The streets are quiet, lined with orange and white barricades instead of gutters. The rain, unseasonable and unexpected, pools on the roads. It has nowhere to go. There are no sidewalks; beyond the plastic barricades, the streets just roll out into rubble and dust and are like the rest of this city, under pressure of construction, on the cusp of being reclaimed by the desert all together.

Dubai is a twenty-first century dream city sold hard on a handful of facts, a sprinkling of spin and lashings of conjecture. Dubai’s spectacular growth is impressive, but the city-state on the edge of the Persian Gulf remains unknowable, tinged by the lingering exoticism and fear which shadow the Middle East.

Dubai embodies an urban development philosophy which embraces acceleration and dispersion as opposed to high density. Like other post-modern cities – Las Vegas, Los Angeles and the Gold Coast, which have all claimed to be the fastest growing cities in their territories at some point in their short histories – Dubai also emerged from sand. But its claim is greater: it is now the fastest growing city in the world. Forty years ago, Dubai was little more than a small fishing and pearling town of fifty-eight thousand people on the edge of the desert. Following the discovery of oil in 1966, it began to be transformed, and after the British left and the federation of seven emirates formed the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1971, its population grew threefold in less than a decade. It has since doubled every ten years. Dubai is now home to just under one and half million people; eight hundred new residents arrive every day.
Although Dubai’s creation as a global city was initially fuelled by oil, black gold only accounts for about 6 per cent of its US$37 billion gross domestic product. If oil were the magic ingredient, then neighbouring Oman and Qatar (which have larger oil reserves) or Saudi Arabia (with three-quarters of the world’s remaining oil) would have produced cities of international calibre. They have not.

Dubai has made itself. It is largely the vision of His Highness Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, Prime Minister of and Vice-President of UAE, and ruler of Dubai, whose family has reigned since 1833. When Sheik Mohammed became Crown Prince in 1995, he was determined to create a relatively open and tolerant city-state, although critics say his dream is based on the oldest business plan – slave labour. Yet Dubai flourishes, growing faster even than China, surrounded by hard-line Islamic republics and the nightmare of Iraq. The ‘anything is possible’ attitude and absence of personal, corporate and sales taxes has resulted in phenomenal foreign migration and investment. Diversification from an oil economy to one based on service and tourism has had an unprecedented impact in a region otherwise locked in stasis.

In Dubai, play is big business.

Luxury and its rhetoric flood the landscape. Competition is fierce. The Wallpaper City Guide suggests that service in Dubai is ‘exceptional’, the epitome of ‘traditional Arab hospitality even if for the most part it is dispensed by Asians not Arabs’. Nightclubs in five-star hotels are replete with personal butlers, high-end designer furniture and panoramic views through giant apex ceilings and seamless glass walls. Just ordering a fruit juice can become a salubrious experience. Immaculate attendants in starched white aprons and hats deftly inlay exotic fruits inside a glass finished with (imported) wild flowers.

Like some Western cities which have developed rapidly across two or three cultural movements – expressionism, modernism and post-modernism – Dubai is fuelled by money from an interlocking nexus of leisure, entertainment and development. Nearly six thousand international construction companies operate here – the affinity between it and the Gold Coast is underlined by the high-level presence of Gold Coast-based construction companies such as Emirates Sunland (a subsidiary company of Sunland Group Australia) and the troubled MFS Group, both engaged in large-scale projects in the
city. Of the more than two hundred Australian companies registered with the Dubai Chamber of Commerce, over sixty are involved in construction. Joel Hicks, the Australian Trade Commissioner in Dubai, offers a prosaic explanation: ‘Australia is well experienced in building on sand, soft soil and construction of infrastructure …’

Local companies are also well versed in the development of luxury resort and hotel complex design and construction – skills on high demand in Dubai. The Gold Coast claims an official sister-city relationship with Dubai, a relationship reflected in accelerating tourism (136 per cent increase in 2007). Sunland, which has put its stamp on the ‘new millennium’ reimagining of Surfers Paradise, has over $1.6 billion invested in large-scale projects in Dubai, including the recently completed $600 million Versace resort, a sister to the Versace resort it build on the Gold Coast in 2004. Sunland’s newest venture, D1, is touted as a ‘sister tower’ to the Q1, the world’s tallest residential tower located on the Gold Coast. ‘There’s a synergy in the decision to replicate Q1 … in Dubai. Both [cities] share a reputation as a tourism and lifestyle destination … both are seeking to expand their economic base, through tourism and as a preferred location to live and work.’

Capitalising on international expertise allows Dubai to sell the accoutrements of the ‘Western’ lifestyle more successfully than the petrochemicals that fuel it.

In contrast to other global centres, Dubai has not evolved via industrial processes or revolutions; it is its own creation, having engineered an accelerated growth in an inhospitable landscape, midway between the old world and the new. Its stature as a global city has been achieved without historical or religious subtext – a remarkable overwriting of its history and geography.

Dubai, like other frontier territories, has been ‘created’ – first by dredging the Dubai Creek to create one of the largest ports in the world, and then by following the logic of construction capitalism. Importantly, it is a product of poetic invention, of words and images coupled with money, technology and know-how. A city founded and sold on promises – the tallest building in the world, the first seven-star hotel, the first underwater hotel, the largest amusement park, biggest floating hotel, even replication of the world itself. All appropriated, derivative and iconic because Dubai is a borrowed, temporary
landscape where the vision of the city overwrites every experience of it; it is a city engaged permanently in its own creative act.

The hyper-reality demanded by the simulated industries of leisure and entertainment results in dispersed, smooth and stretched notions of urbanity. New frontier landscapes like Dubai are not complicated, turbulent metropolitan structures piled on top of themselves like Euro-styled cities. They do not evolve, decay or fall into nostalgic ruin. They are not highly textural, sculptural or monumental: reverence is not directed to the prominence and permanence of the centralised town hall or square. Instead, new frontier cities create reverential expression and then replace it – shopping precincts, entertainment sites, residential and tourist towers run in strips or erupt in clusters and shift constantly to meet new demands. Like massive reflectors, these cities are as sleek as flat screens, virtual billboards projecting the extremes of attainable excess. This cinematic vernacular is most marked in the entertainment and pleasure strips which dominate cities like Dubai – spectacle and impermanence define and drive the shifting landscape.

One of the most startling contrasts of the Dubai experience is the gap between projected fantasy and aesthetic reality. Many cities modelled on new frontier principles of hype and simulation suffer from real-time fallout. Bertolt Brecht once described Los Angeles as a living manifestation of hell; Hunter S. Thompson declared Las Vegas to be the site where the revolutionary project of the ’60s rolled out, stalled and rolled back; and countless Aussie detractors have renamed Surfers ‘Sufferers’ Paradise’. Inevitably, the notion of paradise lost becomes part of these cities’ definitive mythology, a cultural movement characterised by the noir narratives set in Los Angeles where the city acts as a character caught in the seductive ground between vacuous excess and hard-line reality.

Dubai conjures similar feelings of displacement and confusion. The myth continuously bumps up against the real. Disappointment punctuated by amazement and awe prevails. The sight of the Burj Dubai, the world’s tallest building, rising out of the dust and scaffolding and rubble is one of those elusive moments. The vision of it takes your breath away – until you take in what surrounds it.
Dubai is best described as a giant construction site. The dust kicked up by thousands of earth movers, vehicles and 25 per cent of the world’s cranes reaching into the sky hangs in the air like a second horizon. Some days the dust lingers halfway up the towers on Sheik Zayed Road like a prophetic shroud. Cranes, barricades, hastily erected plywood signs, vast vacant gravel plots, holes in the ground and unfinished streets clutter the landscape. There are almost no trees. Each verdant micro-landscape is manufactured and maintained at great expense and effort. This is the desert, after all.

In other parts of the city, the aesthetic endeavour is more seamless; the coastal resort stretch in Jumeirah, framed by the two famous palm-shaped residential developments and dotted by some of the world’s most elaborate and opulent hotels, is camera ready. At the Wafi Centre, an upmarket retail, hotel and hospitality Mecca, sprinklers line the outer walls of a replica Egyptian pyramid-inspired precinct and run hard to keep the foliage alive. This year Sheik Mohammed announced plans to adopt a ‘green building code’ and to ‘green-ify the city’. If the swathes of English-style lawns on patches of public land proliferate as a result, it seems likely that this green agenda will continue to defy local nature and geology rather than work with it.

New-frontier cities tend to exist on the margins of continents, at the edges of coastlines, on faultlines, in deserts and at other natural points of demarcation. This is no accident. The new frontier requires a passage across, from or towards inhospitable territory. It requires arrival and imminent danger to define its character, a natural environment that is at once beautiful and threatening. Los Angeles thrives on the crossroads of seismic fault lines; Las Vegas erupts out of the Spanish Trail; the Gold Coast builds its high-rises on sand perilously close to the ocean.

The desire to defy natural boundaries is an amplified preoccupation in Dubai. Beyond the coastline and the crowded banks of the single natural inlet, Dubai Creek, the terrain is largely flat and arid, salt-crusted coastal plains; crushed shell and coral sand dunes eventually give way to gravel deserts in the shattered, jagged landscapes closer to the Western Hajar Mountains. With few natural formations to create a pleasing aesthetic, planners in Dubai literally changed the shape of the earth, building giant islands to create more waterfront. Cargo ships pumped sand from the ocean floor to create these massive offshore developments like some alien wonder at work. ‘The World’ is regenerated in the
form of a multi-purpose residential and tourist development: three hundred islands made from 286 million tonnes of rock, a twenty-seven kilometre breakwater and more than two hundred kilometres of new coastline. The scale is testament to the city’s boundless ambition. Reconfiguring the natural environment in Dubai does require colossal focus.

Nakheel, developer of the iconic palm island projects and The World, recently announced plans for its most ambitious project – ‘The Universe’, a cluster of seven hundred hectares of coral-shaped islands which (unlike its namesake) will take just twenty years to complete.

In January 2008, Nakheel finished The World. To celebrate, the company bought the front and back covers of all the city’s major dailies to declare the ‘completion of an epic’ (the biblical proportions of this ‘new world’ – not lost on the marketers). The World is recognisable, but decidedly skew-whiff; Australia is missing Tasmania, New Zealand looks like a fortune cookie and there seem to be some very large breakaway continents off the coast of America. No doubt similar poetic licence will be necessary in the reconstruction of the universe.

These massive developments serve their purpose. They declare Dubai’s urban identity a global winner in both innovation and scale. On these terms, they are impressive but from the window of the aeroplane at night, or via satellite imaging, the rampant cluster of islands seems somehow childish, a disobedient gesture, a fey attempt at playing God over the Earth.

Cities like Dubai are twenty-first century ‘gold rush’ towns – places of speculation and prospect where the real prize is not what you can unearth from the land but what you create on top of it. Casino developer Steve Wynn famously described Las Vegas as ‘what God would have done if he had the money’.

Dubai is a ‘nouveau rich paradise’ where professionals on salaries three times what they could earn at home struggle ‘not to be corrupted by the sheer opulence and materialism’. In nightclubs they gather around tables reserved by young rich Arab businessmen and compete for the highest tab as LCD screens reveal the total to the room. The impetus for excess might be reminiscent of the star-studded decadence of Los Angeles in the ’70s or the ‘greed is good’ of Wall Street a decade later, but the sheer
scale of lavishness in Dubai is new, its proclivity for human purchase – bidding for and acquiring foreign flesh – is something at which this city excels.

The extravagance is seductive. As we wander past the fake sandstone hieroglyphics, through the opulent gardens of Raffles Dubai, sprinklers teeming, discreet lights illuminating every polished surface, I want to be let into the nightclub; like everyone else, I want the VIP pass. It takes three discussions, two checkpoints and finally we are riding (with our own private attendant) to the apex of the Wafi pyramid and inside the 360 degree glass-encased China Moon Champagne Bar. At night, this high, you can’t see the giant holes in the ground or register the acres of upturned sand and gravel punctuating the city. Even the no-fly-by lights on the thousands of cranes sticking out the tops of half constructed buildings and mountains of scaffold are like constant fireworks flashing promises. Dubai seems to live up to its magical purpose. We dance, our arms outstretched to the titled glass ceiling, and it feels like we’re on top of the world.

Later, as I make my way to the bathrooms, I am joined suddenly by a young Filipina attendant. The nightclub is so large her job is to usher me across the marble floors to the bathrooms where other attendants fawn and pander. I am horrified when I realise that she will wait for me. ‘No, it’s fine,’ I say. ‘You don’t have to wait for me.’ But she won’t leave. ‘This is fine ma’am. I wait for you. No problem.’

In the toilet, my head is spinning. Not just from the decorative and generously proportioned cocktails but from the idea that I should be on this side of the door and she on the other. On the face of it, nothing but very expensive panelled wood separates us, but in Dubai this young girl is my slave. And, rather than make me feel special, or regal, as each gesture of such exaggerated service is supposed to, the charade just leaves me hollow.

Back in the club, where my new friends gather on designer couches, I take five and remove myself from the conversation. As I’m staring out at the vast landscape of Dubai at 2 am, I think about Richard, Suraj and Tiera, the staff at my hotel who would have just finished their twelve-hour shifts and are probably being taken by bus to the camp where they live. When I mention this to Amjad, a British national with Pakistani heritage who I met at the same hotel, he looks at me thoughtfully and says: ‘You’re going to the camp tomorrow night, aren’t you? Well I can tell you babe, the girl you’re so
worried about and those kids back at the hotel, you’ll see … you’ll see they’re some of the lucky ones.’

The overriding ethic of chance and potential explains why a hold on things is always tenuous in the new frontier. The urban territory never settles into a position where it is no longer new, no longer formidable, no longer a frontier because that is what a new frontier city is – perpetually being resettled, rediscovered and reclaimed.

Existing on the edge, flouting the margins, cracks, barriers and faultlines of dramatic natural topographies, ultimately infects all aspects of the municipal experience; the mix of defiance and reverie directed towards deserts, ridges, mountains, seismic plates of overlapping rock, erosive coastlines imparts a reckless and non-compliant social logic. Public spectacle encourages experimentation and innovation; only in the excessive otherworldliness of a new frontier city like Dubai does pumping 3,500 barrels of oil a day to make snow and an indoor ski run in the middle of the desert seem both plausible and natural. The defiant message reads: even the most unlikely frontiers can be manipulated and tamed. Any underlying anxiety that such a hold might be tenuous or temporary is ignored. Consequence – environmental, social, economic or human – is not enough to stop progress.

These addictive, playful acts of illogical defiance are sociologically mimicked; everyone is pushing boundaries, everyone is on edge; prospect flavours every exchange.

Sultan Ahmad Bin Sulayem, executive chairman of Nahkeel, captures the essence: ‘The biggest risk is not taking a risk at all.’ This is not a city that encourages restraint. As I met with senior officials, media players and professionals, the pioneering spirit was palpable. It was also infectious. Dubai is a place where it is possible for a twenty-year-old to be a chief executive, a place where people seem inspired by a system, however autocratic, in which ideas take precedence and mountains can quite literally be moved to realise them.

Ahmad Al Hammadi, general manager of Awraq Publishing, says his foreign colleagues are often stunned when he tells them he is responsible for the output of three daily newspapers. ‘If we want something done they tell me it will take months, this is not acceptable. I tell them two weeks.’ It’s a sentiment shared by Abdullatif Alsayegh, the
Arab Media Group’s chief executive. ‘Slow people cannot exist here. We are not in a position to wait. I like to think I have a fit organisation.’ He laughs. ‘The person who works for me he is never sitting down. He is always moving, always going from place to place.’ The pressures on professionals in Dubai are high, the hours long. But Abdullatif believes that ‘if you give people flexibility, it’s not just financial satisfaction, they over deliver’.

One of the young people in Abdullatif’s employ painted a different picture. ‘I’m glad we got out today. Usually on Saturday, all I do is sleep.’ His friends agreed. ‘It’s not easy to exit. It’s the way this city drives you, you just have to keep going and going.’

Ibrahim Totonji, an ex-pat from Lebanon, is section head for Business 24/7, the region’s first business daily. He says: ‘We are running all the time. We don’t get satisfied easily. It’s not smart to stop and think you’re good; the pace of Dubai doesn’t allow you to do that.’ The threshold of satisfaction proves to be elusive for many other business leaders. For Abdullatif Alsayegh, dedication is a matter of example. ‘This is what we learn from our leader. Sheikh Mohammed only sleeps four to five hours a day and he’s older than us. When you work under someone like him, it’s tough. You create competition from within. There is no finish line.’

Only two hundred thousand of Dubai’s 1.4 million residents are not expatriates; foreigners make up 95 per cent of the workforce, most employed for a pittance to grease the wheels of construction and service, others earning more than they could have dreamt of as they sat in university lectures only a few years earlier. The city prides itself on an open arms policy – it would not exist otherwise. Arab business leaders may be obsequious but in real terms this strategy enables the city’s monstrous growth. Without the influx of foreign workers at all levels of service and expertise, Dubai would grind to a halt. There is a widespread perception throughout the UAE that locals are lazy as the inequities of cultural lineage are played out. Many foreign business people resent the reprieves given to locals via the back door in such an autocratic system, and avoid employing UAE nationals despite laws that require every business of a certain size to employ an Emirate human resources manager to protect local interests. One boss told me how he found a way around this: ‘We don’t have an HR manager. We have a senior administration officer and she’s Indian.’ The tensions implicit in such a divided, race-
based class system mean locals often give in to overt displays of extreme nationalism. I was often surprised when a usually courteous and accommodating Emirati national would erupt in a tirade of racial abuse – usually on the roads, usually directed at Indians – or say ‘You’ll like so and so, he’s a local boy’ as if each interaction required this polite
distinction.

The commercial landscape in Dubai is caught in a cyclical process of construction and deconstruction; high-rises go up and come down, massive tourist-related events thrust themselves into the landscape and disappear just as quickly, whole city precincts are implanted, razed and reinvented. The chameleonic environment requires consistent immigration of people – eight hundred a day – who can invent a market and incite desire in order to sell things before they exist. This attracts thrillseekers, boosters and con artists, as well as the speculators, entrepreneurs and risk-takers on whom the city relies. The promise of abundance lures fifteen million tourists a year along with a constant stream of itinerant workers seeking an environment in which to remake themselves.

While all professionals in Dubai share similar goals – making money, pushing the limits – there are clear distinctions between the educated expatriate population and Emirati nationals. Though devotion to ‘the cause’ is expected, young foreign professionals can be more selfish. They know transferred knowledge is the game here, and they are happy to participate – for a fee. Both Abdullatif and Ahmad spoke openly about providing continuing challenges and inducements to their local and international staff. In an environment where ‘you don’t learn from mistakes you eliminate them’, high demand is offset by training incentives and increased responsibility.

They know it would be a mistake not to invest in youth. The average Emirati family has seven children. This, combined with the huge population of foreign young people, means that two-thirds of those living in UAE are under twenty-five. Abdullatif puts it this way: ‘Many people in the West believe in dialogue; they want round tables and more and more conferences. This is not the right way. I am starting with youth. I’m starting there and let’s finish it. It’s going to be a better world.’

The German manager of the business hotel where I stayed suggested that, while these innovations and strategies make Dubai very attractive, ‘there are not many people who will say they love this country. They are here for other reasons: development,
construction, economics.’ When I asked whether he employed any Emirati nationals, he said ‘yes’, then laughed and said ‘one’.

For Abdullatif and Ahmad, personal commitment is far more patriotic. Abdullatif was granted his position by the ruling party. In five years, he has built the Arab Media Group from one radio station into an independent media empire of seven companies employing two thousand people. It’s an impressive achievement. The pace of the company’s expansion has attracted the attention of global media – Disney, Sony and News Corp, companies which seek his counsel (and his patronage). His debt of gratitude to his ruler is marked: ‘Sheikh Mohammed, he selected me personally for this machine. He changed our life upside down. I thought I was going to be controlled, but it became like a dream. If you answer their questions the trust is built.’

Sheikh Mohammed’s face is everywhere, on giant billboards, on the sides of buildings, even on the windows of private cars. The level of worship is inseparable from the impact of his attention and benevolence; genuine reverence permeates the social fabric. Though very little is known of the pre-Islamic history of the region, people of the south-east Arabian Peninsula were historically noted as idol worshippers. Ahmed says he is motivated by a desire to return something to his country. ‘We are here late because we love our leaders. We believe in them. It is not a game. I want to bring a global standard. I want to be a global figure for my country.’

Dubai is a city that markets itself and lives powerfully in the imagination as a place of exile; a paradise of prospect, a hotspot where dreams can translate to wealth. Any money is good, any industry legitimate. The entrepreneurial environment encourages cutting-edge business propositions and products. Whereas traditional industries rely on supply to predetermined sectors, the market in Dubai is fabricated and does not necessarily require a tangible product or outcomes to flourish.

Success is fêted as a prime manipulation of the accelerated processes of the twenty-first century. In seeking to emulate, epitomise, even redefine the capitalist model, Dubai denies any subjugated memory – the legacy of British, French and American intervention – and chases a destiny akin to the hopeful falsifications of the American dream. Dubai has an advantage in this. There is virtually no regulation which brings the goalposts somewhat closer. Regardless of means or method, the city actively supports
and heralds the proponents of free enterprise. Its new-frontier capitalism is bold and grand.

Western culture’s wildest dreams are appropriated, exaggerated, accelerated and thrust into the mainstream of an ancient local culture for the joy of international consumption. In part, this explains why the city has been so successful. Millions of people do travel to the heart of the Middle East to marvel at a very tall building and shop for Western designer goods without sales taxes – a prospect that must have seemed unlikely even two decades earlier. But the city’s ability to become whatever it wants means it offers an almost irresistible invitation to exploit, as the proliferation of fraudulent, evasive and counterfeit activities in Dubai attests.

This circumstance is very different from classical notions of urban development. Normal regulatory frameworks are subverted and replaced with aggressive, uncontrolled and not uncommonly criminal activities. Rather than being planned, policy-driven, bureaucratically monitored and focused through the social – through discourses of ‘community-building’ and ‘public amenity’, or even ‘sustainability’ – development in Dubai occurs within a volatile economic playground where commercial interest consistently overruns public interest. But with such a large itinerant population, public interest doesn’t necessarily have to equate with national interest. Buried in the sand are plenty of rules designed to privilege locals: UAE-registered companies must be at least 51 per cent owned by a local; foreigners can only purchase leasehold property; securing residency is complicated, elitist and autocratically controlled. Local interests are systematically protected. Unofficially, the points of entry and control are even more adverse – the city may appear to be without regulation to the casual observer, but this is profoundly misleading. Dubai is based on a system of privilege and entitlement as dramatic as any other.

In 1999, David Reiff dubbed Los Angeles the capital of the third world in his book of the same title. The proximity of Los Angeles to Mexico meant a steady stream of largely illegal labour was on hand to drive, serve and raise. The case is similar in Dubai. It is a city ‘run on brown wheels’. Gradually, the young people in the hotel began to trust me. They talked – some in hushed tones, others quite openly – about their lives, what brought
them to Dubai, what they have encountered. I wrongly assumed that such immaculate, educated, bilingual and quick-witted young people would not be living in a labour camp. They are. Most have contractual agreements with corporations that sponsor and pay for their entry into the country and provide them with accommodation and food in exchange for service. Richard, a young Malaysian guy with a fondness for singing, tells me that if he exits his contract before one year he is required to pay 3000 Dirhams ($1,000). After eighteen months, the amount is 1500 Dirhams, but Richard – like most of the other workers in the hotel – earns only 600 Dirhams a month.

Tiera, a pretty young Filipina with false frangipanis in her hair, said at first she was very homesick and unhappy. ‘Now I’m OK. Now I have some friends. We used to get two days off, now only one and sometimes not one. We are short staffed here; it’s not so good. If we do go out, we go to the Philippine nightclub.’ I ask why she doesn’t move out of the camp with some of her friends. But it is not possible. Contract workers cannot live off camp unless they meet certain ‘requirements’ – they must be married and have resident family. Tiera wants to work in an office but she can’t leave her position without financial penalty and she has no time to undertake training. I suggest that she could volunteer in the hotel office to gain some experience. ‘Yes,’ she says. ‘I am trying but there are requirements for that too.’ The labour system in Dubai is complicated, with often-subtle layers of control.

Suraj, an elegant young Indian bartender, leans across the bar to light my cigarette. He tells me that the company recently installed a phone on each floor of the compound. ‘Now they can ring me all the time,’ he says, laughing and shrugging his shoulders.

‘At least you have the phone,’ I say.

‘No, ma’am. The line only comes in. There’s no line out.’

Beside me in the bar, Amjad shows me his wallet full of boarding passes. ‘This is just the last two months,’ he says, shaking his head and flicking through the dozens of cardboard slips. Amjad typifies the shiny new face of international business. He is a senior market developer for a telecommunications company based in both Britain and Dubai. His life is one of constant movement. He has two British passports: one for travel to Israel and another for the rest of the world. Israeli nationals and anyone doing business
there cannot enter the UAE. In America, his boarding passes are stamped ‘6666’, indicating he is ‘a person of interest’. Amjad never leaves an American airport quickly.

Amjad’s Pakistani heritage poses other problems in the UAE. Most of the estimated 600,000 unskilled workers in the country are from the Indian subcontinent. The systematically protected social hierarchy allows latent racism and a sense of superiority to persist. Amjad has been pulled over and questioned by the police several times while driving his BMW 7 series. The questions are always the same: ‘Is this your car?’ ‘Do you have the papers for this car?’ ‘What is your business?’

The labour camp in Al Quoz is only a few kilometres off Sheik Zayed Road. A stone’s throw from some of the world’s most expensive real estate and just behind the colossal glass-cased showrooms of Maserrati, Ferrari and Jaguar, Al Quoz is a ten by twelve kilometre stretch of corporate-sponsored labour accommodation. The word ‘camp’ is misleading. Sixty thousand men and women live in segregated quarters in Al Quoz. There are nine similar ‘camps’ dotted throughout Dubai. Few professional expatriate residents of Dubai have actually seen them. Other business travellers at the bar in my hotel reached a consensus: ‘There’s no reason why anyone would turn off at that particular stretch of road.’

Despite their proximity to the inner city, the camps are largely invisible. Yet every day thousands of labourers in blue overalls crouch on the side of the road in groups awaiting collection, arrive in their hundreds in corporate-branded jackets and caps at the airport or are packed like aqua-coloured ants on the floors of unfinished buildings. The workers are more than visible, they are ubiquitous, yet they remain faceless. When they are not working, no one wonders where they come from or where they go.

The main roads in Al Quoz are tarred, but the rest are dirt, and the grime hangs thickly in the air. The stench is almost unbearable. There are no sewerage facilities in any of the buildings. Every night, tanker trucks enter Al Quoz and pump the effluent out of cesspits through open pipes that stick out of the ground or run in snaking lines past entrances to the compounds.

After the recent rains, it takes a 4WD to drive through parts of Al Quoz. Young men walk knee-deep in water. At an intersection, I notice a group trying to drag a stalled
car out of the mud. They stare at me, their eyes sad and curious. At night, when most of
the workers have returned, the camp teems with Indian, Pakistani and Afghani men. They
mill about outside the dwellings, greet each other and mingle on the muddy street in front
some of the small shops and food outlets on the side of the road, eking out some
semblance of a social life. Many remain in the compounds, simple two-storey structures
which run in long rectangular rows fronted by an endless series of doors and identical
aluminium windows. Ubiquitous blue overalls hang lifelessly on makeshift lines strung
across the concrete corridors between the tenements, crinkled uniform ghosts drying out
in the dusty wind. In one compound, a large group of men stands in a tight circle under
the hand-washed clothing, watching a television that has been wheeled into the centre
court. Inside, up to eight workers sleep in a room only a fraction of the size of any in the
starred hotels.

Slums are an urban reality, but there is something particularly abhorrent about
organised and corporate-sponsored slums in the midst of a burgeoning economy. This
camp, and the others like it, is the real machine of Dubai, the means and the method. In
Al Quoz, the sense of ownership, the sponsored control of human life, is palpable. The
men and women are a long way from home. Each of the concrete buildings is
emblazoned with the names of the luxury hotels and construction companies which
employ those who live in them. Without the names, the drivers who bus workers in and
out of the camp every hour of the day and night would not be able to distinguish one from
another. The irony is startling. Global brands synonymous with privileged excess depend
on the labour of people who live in shabby structures. In Al Qouz, Hilton does not
conjure an A-list lifestyle; it is a concrete shelter with a cast-iron gate and a guard. In
some compounds, workers sign in and out so that the company is aware at all times of
their whereabouts.

Since the major labour uprisings of September 2005, when thousands of workers
barricaded Sheik Zayed Road demanding months worth of unpaid wages, the
international aid organisation Human Rights Watch has campaigned against the
conditions and mistreatment of workers in Dubai’s labour camps. Its November 2006
report, Building Towers, Cheating Workers: Exploitation of Migrant Construction
Workers in the United Arab Emirates, recommended that the UAE Government engage a
number of strategies to protect the rights of workers, including the full implementation of labour laws and the ratification of International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions on occupational health and safety, freedom of association and collective bargaining. The governments of ‘source’ countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) were encouraged to ‘enhance labour departments of embassies and consulates’ and to request ‘full disclosure of causes of death when your citizens suffer fatal injuries’. The governments of those countries negotiating free-trade agreements with the UAE, including the United States, the European Union and Australia, were urged to ‘condition the ratification’ of trade agreements on ‘improved protection for workers’ rights’. The seventy-one-page report addresses the complicated web of corporate duty of care, corruption and government inaction in a rigorously researched indictment of the human cost of unfettered progress: ‘As the UAE undergoes one of the largest construction booms in the world, at least half a million construction workers are employed there. Behind the glitter and the luxury, the experiences of these migrant workers present a much less attractive picture – of wage exploitation, indebtedness to unscrupulous recruiters and working conditions that are hazardous to the point of being deadly.’

The UAE’s commitment to labour reform is more public relations than policy. Almost every day, the office of Sheik Mohammed issues proclamations to the national newspapers designed to placate international anxiety, curtail discussion and neutralise negative reporting. The promise that changes are being implemented is enough to justify continued exploitation. In a city that constructs ‘ideas’ in record time, the government has moved slowly on reform, ‘evidently choosing to uphold the interests of generally powerful and extremely profitable construction companies over the most basic rights of the human worker’, according to Human Rights Watch. Since 1980, the UAE law that requires a minimum wage has not been enforced. The average construction worker receives $175 a month, yet the average per capita income in the UAE is $31,000 a year and some high end expat professionals are likely to earn that in a month.

Following the very public uprising of construction workers in 2005, the Minister for Labour, Ali bin Abdullah Al Kaabi, directed Al Hamed Development to pay the workers within twenty-four hours. The local media praised the minister as ‘hard hitting’, and said his response indicated the government’s evolving stance against errant
employers. Human Rights Watch discovered that, six months later, the company had paid ‘only two of the four months of delayed wages and had missed a further month … and the government had not fined or otherwise punished the company’. Al Hamed Development boasts on its website that it has recorded ‘growth that has never been achieved in the construction business locally regionally or even internationally’.

Most migrant workers in Dubai are trapped in a cycle of disempowerment. Most have their passports confiscated by their employers when they arrive, and are contracted to specific employers with little chance of transfer. ‘Switching contracts’ demands a string of bureaucratic processes: at least two years with the current employer, a ‘letter of no objection’ from them and a direct request to the Ministry of Labour to re-register visa and work permits. Workers cannot form trade unions or bargain collectively. There is no independent civil society sector to protect or service the rights of workers. Instead, grievances and are fielded by a newly established government body, the Permanent Committee on Labour Affairs, which received 19,249 complaints regarding unpaid wages in less than a year.

The cycle of abuse and powerlessness is debilitating. Human Rights Watch observed an alarming level of distress-related suicides in labour camps. The Indian consulate reported that eighty-four Indian nationals committed suicide in 2005. Technically, companies are required by law to record work-related accidents, injury and death. The discrepancies between government and corporate figures and those gathered by hospital admissions and trade papers like Construction Week suggest there is a ‘cover up of the extent of death and injury amongst workers’. For instance, official figures note that only six companies out of a possible six thousand recorded injuries in 2005, and the year before only thirty-four deaths were reported. Unofficial reports in the national media put the figure at more like eight hundred, with an average of sixty-five deaths each month on building sites.

Human Rights Watch has drawn the government’s attention to the findings of its research, but to little avail. Sheik Mohammad’s task is to manage an unprecedented boom, to sell promise not address criticism. In a city determined to rise from the desert sands, criticism is seen as a sign of weakness. When I put claims of press censorship to Ahmad Al Hammadi, he dismissed any negative observation as a temporary circumstance
with a curt response and a wave of the hand. ‘Whenever you are number one there is
going to be some talk here or there. This is Dubai. People are working hard.’ His
colleague Abdullatif was more definitive. ‘You don’t have to be a hero to come here and
highlight a problem we already know we have. We are learning. Action is being taken.
You don’t have to talk about it every day. You are either lazy or you have nothing to say.
We live in a city that likes to spread positive energy.’ We lock eyes. His point made, he
looks away.

Dr Aisha Abdullah Al Nuaimi, Associate Professor of Mass Communication at Sharjah
University, is less evasive, ‘We do not have a free press yet but rather scared journalists
and writers.’ The line between fear and confidentiality is a fine one. On my last morning
in Dubai, it is still raining. I meet an Australian urban planner. He tells me that,
regrettably, he won’t be able to say anything on the record. ‘I checked my contract. It’s
watertight.’

There is a lot he would like to say. I tuck into my lunch but he seems bound,
taking small sips of water, watching his words, crossing his legs. I do most of the talking.
I ask: ‘Is this it? Is Dubai the epitome of what we can do? Shopping malls, giant palm
trees and rows and rows of tall buildings.’ He agrees that everything is back to front, that
people like him are constantly playing catch up, troubleshooting, that the whole project is
a missed opportunity to create a city from the ground up amenable to the environment, a
model of best practice in urban planning and design. It could have been a twenty-first
century city that learnt from what preceded it. Instead, it has embodied excess. In his very
carefully chosen words, the urban planner says: ‘I’d say it’s an unhealthy city.’ He looks
resigned.

Dubai is a city of stories. Official stories. Projected stories. Stories untold. In the
hotel bar, I meet Peter, an expatriate engineer stationed in Dubai for more than a decade.
He recently rescued two Pakistani women from a fire in a locked compound in which
eight perished. Officially, the women were secured in the room by their employer, in
accordance with their own cultural practices and religion. A clause in their contract
prevented them from fraternising with men away from home or without chaperones.
This practice is not uncommon, and is not limited to the camps. Many men lock their women and children in their homes or apartments as they indulge in a Westernised lifestyle. Peter described seeing a woman throw her children off the balcony of a locked apartment before she was consumed by the fire. The children also died. The reason for the tragedy went unreported. One paragraph in the paper noted that three people had died in a house fire. ‘Ultimately,’ he tells me, taking another long drag on his cigarette, ‘there is no legal recourse for such practices.’

Like many expatriates who have spent long stretches of time in Dubai, Peter is both outraged by and reconciled to the complicated intricacies of the society. As an outsider, he oscillates between frustration and a quietly spoken desire to make a difference. Every night after work, he walks into the hotel bar, plants himself in the same seat and asks Suraj or Richard to keep the Jack Daniels flowing. He talks to the staff and tries to ignore the consistent stream of enthusiastic new arrivals from America, Australia and Europe whose most burning question always relates to girls. ‘I know they’re going to ask me – it’s just a matter of time.’

I describe what I’ve seen in the labour camps, and he does not argue with me. Furiously stubbing out his cigarette, he says he knows the people in charge of safety at the camps: 140 inspectors who oversee almost 250,000 businesses. He points to Richard and Suraj who are almost psychically attentive to our every need. ‘These guys live in camps. You ask Richard: twelve-hour shifts for shit. Just chicken biryani to eat, just rice and a bit of chicken interving.’

Richard looks at me and smiles. ‘It’s true, ma’am. I’m so sick of chicken biryani.’

We talk about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as if we were anywhere in the world, not propped up at a comfortable bar on the doorstep of those conflicts. I tell him about Mahboba Rawi, an Afghani refugee resident in Australia who runs an internationally recognised aid organisation dedicated to improving the lives of widows and orphans in Afghanistan. I tell him she started the organisation with $120. He is unimpressed, as if the desire to change the Middle East is a fool’s errand.

Yet in December 2004 Peter joined the large-scale UAE intervention after the Asian tsunami, proud his was one of the first teams on the ground, thanks to swift government pledges to action and huge funding. When I ask him why more isn’t done to
protect people closer to home – those in the labour camps, UAE neighbours affected by the wars – he shrugs. ‘I prefer natural disasters. At least with natural disasters there’s an end-point, the job finishes. The kind of battle you’re talking about, that battle never ends.’

Maybe he’s right. We face forward, dragging hard on our cigarettes.

Richard pours us another Jack Daniels.

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