

## A GLIMPSE OF DUBAI IN KHARTOUM AND NOUAKCHOTT Prestige urban projects on the margins of the Arab world

Armelle Choplin, associate professor of geography, Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée University, EA ACP / UMR PRODIG, [armelle.choplin@univ-paris-est.fr](mailto:armelle.choplin@univ-paris-est.fr)

Alice Franck, associate professor of geography, Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University, UMR PRODIG, [alice.franck@univ-paris1.fr](mailto:alice.franck@univ-paris1.fr)

Most urban studies discuss the extensive building of skyscrapers and malls in relation to economic growth, especially in the foremost global cities of the developed world, such as New York, Tokyo and Washington DC (Sassen: 1991). However, there is a scarcity of empirical studies investigating the degree to which non-Western and developing countries and cities take part to this global urban transformation (Deboulet, Berry-Chikhaoui, Rouleau-Berger: 2007). This article proposes to redress the balance by taking the example of Nouakchott in Mauritania and Khartoum in Sudan, as emerging capital cities under the impact of globalization<sup>i</sup>.

In the Arab world, one of its manifestations is the widespreading of prestige urban projects, inspired by the Gulf models, especially Dubai (Barthel, Verdeil, 2008; Barthel, 2008). This paper discusses how urban projects in Khartoum and Nouakchott take inspiration from this hypermodern and fascinating urbanism (Schmidt: 2006, Lavergne: 2009, Elshatshawy, 2010). Like many cities of the Maghreb and the Middle East (Elshatshawy, 2006; 2008), Nouakchott and Khartoum are undergoing massive urban transformations characterized by the construction of new residential areas and central business districts. Qatar, Kuwaiti or Saudi companies finance them. Previously, these cities did not attract significant global capital due to the fact that they were located between the Arab world and Sub-Saharan Africa. Even if they were unexpected, contemporary modernizing urban settings and financial over-investments in real estate show how they are entirely involved in globalization.

These projects represent a strategy to trace a proper pathway to hyper-modernity emerging from geopolitical marginality on the international scene. New economic and financial opportunities, such as oil exploitation inflows, offer the chance to give these cities an image of successful development. Notwithstanding, this prestige urban transformation stands in stark contrast with the reality of these marginal States hampered by chronic economic poverty and social and political unrest. But this contrast is also symbolic: the management of such projects is of utmost significance for two countries that find themselves marginalised and whose Arab identity is a point of constant contestation. Actually, these countries are also part of the Sahel and Nouakchott and Khartoum can be considered African cities.

Relying on long-term fieldwork in Khartoum and Nouakchott<sup>ii</sup>, the article employs a comparative approach in order to expose the common urban dynamics resonating with the emergent model of “*Dubaisation*”. We will first demonstrate how the genesis of these urban projects is intricately linked to the discovery of oil and foreign

investments. An in-depth analysis of the main urban projects will prove that the State, as the primary landowner, takes part actively in this privatization process with new neoliberal policies. Then, the article will focus on conflicting issues arising within the local society, such as people displacement and claims to land, illustrating the side-effects of urban transformations in various popular neighbourhoods. Finally, this paper highlights the flagrant discrepancy between such luxurious, ostentatious and extravagant projects and the harsh realities within urban and national settings heavily characterized by poverty.

### 1. Urban projects pouring out of oil holes

A wind of change has been blowing through Nouakchott and Khartoum since their integration into the petro-countries circle. This has generated a two-tier process: these capital-cities have become new *eldorados* for foreigner investors, and they follow the path of Emirates' development.

In Khartoum, new office towers, stores, malls, lush golf courses and gated communities are rapidly sprouting on the banks of the Nile as well as within the wealthy districts. The image of downtown Khartoum is one of a vast construction site. The suburban areas are no less untouched by the construction of luxurious compounds. The airport, currently located at the heart of Khartoum, is due to be relocated from the downtown area towards the south-western fringe of the city. All of these physical transformations inscribed on the face of the city epitomize the new economic wealth of Sudan. Heralded by the discovery of crude oil, the growth is one of the fastest of the world in the last decade. In Sudan, the tentative oil production levels of August 1999 have seen a significant increase and today the country prides itself on the production of 500 000 barrels of crude oil per day. The economic growth of the country has been exponential reaching a high of 9% in 2006. However, since 1999, the emergence of this oil wealth has not effectively realigned the developmental disparities within the different regions of the country which have prevailed since independence. On the contrary they have reinforced the dominance of the capital city as the economic stronghold of the Sudanese State and furthermore contributed to a mass migration towards it in search of better economic sustenance (Denis, 2005).

The oilfields that had been discovered in the 1970's in the southern region of the country are at present overwhelmingly in the hands of foreign companies, especially those from East Asia. In a matter of a few years, East Asia has become the primary commercial partner of Sudan with 80% of exportation directed towards this region of the world and 34% of imports emanating from it. These foreign companies, generally Chinese (CNCP), control the oil industry and penetrate the whole of the Sudanese economy. Despite the influence of these companies, they are not the only presence on the Sudanese landscape. Other investment includes Arab and European capital. The latter interest has been ignited by a favourable economic climate that has been enhanced by the signing of the peace agreement between the Sudanese state and the SPLA (in the south) bringing an end to a protracted civil war<sup>iii</sup>.

Capital cities appear as entry points where the power and influence of the new class of global actors are clearly on display. A class of Sudanese, Arab and Asian businessmen has emerged thanks to petro-dollar inflows. The building called "*Burj al-Fatih*", with its sail outline that evokes the "*Burj al-Arab*" in Dubai, embodies this Sudanese change. The construction and real estate sector remain the most solid forms of investment adapted to the nature of a political economy based on patronage. Hence, petro-dollars continue to be reinvested in this sector within Greater Khartoum. This newly developed business class purchases and builds hotels, resorts, high rise villas... taking advantage of an increasing western humanitarian presence that contends with the fragile peace process and a full blown crisis in the Darfur region (Bartoli, 2006). These high sources of monetary revenue are exacerbating land pressure and driving up rents. Simultaneously, they are making the construction sector more dynamic.

The discovery of oil has provided the Sudanese government with millions of dollars in surplus. This revenue is now increasingly being invested in real estate programs rather than the war effort. In 1990, only five bridges existed around the confluence of the Blue and the White Niles. Between 2005 and 2009, three more bridges were constructed. Currently, the edification of a bridge is underway to connect Khartoum to the new airport. The frenzied development of the urban space is also palpable within the transport sector. Road construction tries to follow the large increase of private vehicles that circulate the streets. Many tarmac roads are new, and some of them are reaching the furthest outskirts of the city.

In juxtaposition, Mauritania has followed a similar path in recent years. In July 2009, Mauritians watched on the internet a video clip of the soon to be elected presidential candidate Mohammed Ould Abdel Aziz. "The constructive change" video showed plans for a new modern city, dotted with skyscrapers, malls, pipelines, and luxury resorts. A running water tap symbolized the victory of Aziz-driven development on the desert. Although this virtual video still seems a mirage, Mauritians were swayed to conceive of it as reality due to the announcement of oil exploitation that proclaimed economic development, success, and opulence. In 2001, the Australian oil company Woodside had discovered untapped supplies and has been exploiting them since 2006, fostering hopes of Mauritania becoming a new "Oil Emirate". In late 2007, after an embezzlement scandal, Woodside sold its operating licence to the Malaysian giant oil company, Petronas. Various oil companies were granted new oilfields discovered within the onshore Taoudenni area: Total (France), Repsol (Spain) and CNPC (China). The experts estimated the potential reserves at 400 million barrels of crude oil: Mauritania could become one of the ten largest African producers. Actually, the daily extraction, initially estimated at 75,000 barrels, is a mere 15,000 barrels.

This recent discovery of oil heralds a new phase of economic growth. It equally signals a political change: after being discredited due to the inauguration of an Israeli embassy in Nouakchott in 2001, the Mauritanian government has attempted to regain recognition on the international stage and to attract foreign funds. During a meeting in 2008 between the former Mauritanian President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallah, Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, and Sultan Ahmed Bin Selim (manager of Dubai International Development) an economic agreement was signed and investment opportunities were evaluated. These evaluations significantly focused on the banking,

energy, tourism, mining, and urban sectors. Nowadays, this economic transition is materially visible: the first historical colonial buildings located downtown were destroyed leaving room for a new central business district. The town council planned to build five skyscrapers. One of them will be the "*Oil tower*". The Libyans are constructing a 30-storey hotel. Kuwaiti businessmen have planned to build yet another in the north of the city. Gulf companies promoting urban development have their headquarters in new luxury buildings like the "*Al-Khaima City Centre*", the new luxury shopping mall erected in Nouakchott downtown. The Qatari Diar Real Estate Company is promoting a one million dollar luxurious resort twenty kilometres North of the capital. This project is called "*Nouakchott new town*". Even if the financial investment is lower in Mauritania than in other countries such as Sudan or Morocco (See Barthel, Planet, in this issue), it is comparatively important for one of the poorest and underdeveloped country lacking in significant private investments. In light of these plans, the representative of Diar Qatari in Nouakchott, the former Mauritanian foreign minister and ambassador in Doha, stated: "*Now Mauritania is the place to be. It is remote from the main Arab centres. The Qatar government is interested in alternative Arab countries such as Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan, and the Comoros Islands that are not very influential, but which have the potential to become a starting point to extend similar opportunities to other neighbouring countries. Other countries (Egypt, North African countries) are too influential and complicated*"<sup>iv</sup>.

Nowadays, these capital cities are attractive to foreigner investors, thanks to neoliberal policies and strategic political alliances. They benefit from the increase in revenues accrued from land tenure, and the transformation of petro-income into real estate projects. The State is not only encouraging them to invest, it is involved in these projects as one of the main actors of the urban metamorphoses.

## 2. Is the Capital city up for sale?

In the neo-liberal economic climate, the execution of prestige projects is accompanied by a certain number of conflicts pitting small-scale landowners, the State and important investors against each other. Segments of the city are for sale or reclaimed in order to concede a place for these colossal programmes. Thus, it is worth posing the salient question "*is the Capital city for sale?*" (Bredeloup, Bertonecello, Lombard, 2008). Unmistakably, the main actor of this privatization is the State. Since in such instances the State is the main landowner, the new context of speculation has serious implications for urban policies and priorities in urban planning.

In Khartoum, the transformations of the Ministry of Urban Planning give evidence to the fluctuations and evolutions of the revenues accrued from urban property and land. In 1996, Johan Post indicated that the budget reserved for the construction of urban structures was extremely low. In addition, the fiscal prowess of the Ministry of Urban Planning was significantly weak. At that time, the Ministry was housed within a humble run down building, seriously lacking in material resources (Post, 1996). This description stands in stark opposition to the imposing buildings at the heart of the city that the

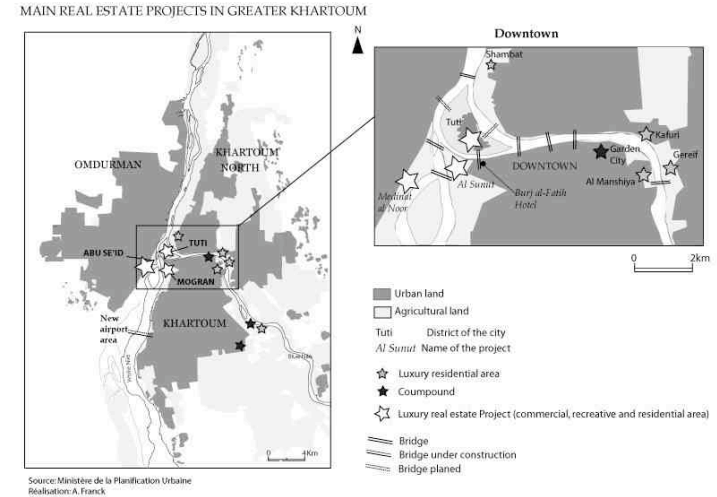
Ministry of Urban Planning occupies now. In 2005, the Ministry was well equipped with a state of the art Department of Cartography directed by highly qualified personnel.

The increasing interest of the State in land tenure creates novel forms of public-private partnerships. In 2004, the Governorate of Khartoum and the Ministry of Physical Planning and the National Social Insurance Fund signed a partnership agreement with Dal Property Development, one of the most powerful Sudanese private companies<sup>5</sup>. The aim of the agreement was to establish the Alsunut Development Company. This public-private partnership was convened to reactivate an “area of business prosperity” in the Al-Mogran zone - the confluence of the Blue and White Nile Rivers. This \$4 billion development project consists of two main phases: the first comprising the construction of a Central Business District (CBD) and the second a residential estate portion. Completion is expected by 2014 with 630 hectares of office space, 1 100 villas, 6 700 apartments affording living space for 40 000 residents and visitors, a marina and a golf course. The site is expected to generate jobs for 50 000 employees (<http://www.alsunut.sd/>). The Sudanese government clarifies in its website that “this state-of-the-art, prime commercial real estate will act as a hub for Eastern Africa’s modern business market”.

On the opposite bank of the Nile within the Abu Se’id area, another waterfront project “*Medinat al-Noor*” is under construction (<http://ipc-kwt.com/al-noor.html>). The urban structures remind of the Al-Mogran project: shopping malls, office blocks, high rise accommodation (communal buildings as well as individually owned villas), a zoo and a golf course. The zoo and the golf course equally feature in the Alsunut project mentioned above. The magnitude of “*Medinat al-Noor*” is such that an industrial zone has been envisaged as part of the project. Furthermore a certain quantity of space has been reserved for a police station as illustrated by 3D images.

Land destined for sale is most often situated on the banks of the Nile and animated with its history. This is land that has been appropriated by those who have occupied it over a long duration of time and furthermore bears the marks of their identities and social biographies. Over the years farmers had cultivated the greatest expanse of this area only to find that their agricultural land was now being transformed into land reserved for construction. This is evident at the confluence of the Blue and White Niles where investors are intending to transform the face of Tuti Island, a rural haven of peace. The private Tuti Island Investment company, which has undertaken this urban development project, appraised at five billion dollars<sup>6</sup>, exhibits its impressive visual images and videos on the Internet (<http://www.tuti-island.com/media.html>) (Fig. 5). The company has close links with China and Egypt who guide the master plan with an engineering firm from Kuwait and a Malaysian subsidiary that execute the work. Before the erection of a modern suspension bridge (at a cost of 14-million dollars), achieved in 2009, access to the island was limited and dependant on the water ferries that crossed the river. The island had been a primary example of uncanny and successful resistance to the thrust and pressure of urbanisation (Lobban, 1982). However, this resistance was curtailed by the desire of government planners and private businessmen to link the island to the other segments of the city via bridges (Omdurman and Khartoum North) in order to alleviate recurring traffic jams. In this way, they envisaged to both transform the island into a traffic node for the whole agglomeration and to create a business district.

Fig. 1: Main real estate projects in Greater Khartoum



On a different part of the continent, in Mauritania, we can similarly observe how private or public interests motivate investment choices. For the Mauritanian State, it has been relatively easy to sell the land on the outskirts of Nouakchott. Created ex-nihilo in 1960, the new capital city is surrounded by uninhabited sand dunes. There is no physical obstacle to urban sprawl... and speculation. In 1983, a law enacted the end of tribal rights in land tenure. The State became the landowner and a real estate investor and a property developer for luxury projects. A primary example of this phenomenon is the Socogim<sup>vii</sup>, the national society of building and real estate, created in 1974. In the 1970's, during the urban growth caused by the droughts, the role of the Socogim was to construct urgently needed social houses. At present, it is promoting a high-rise housing estate composed of 400 villas, named « Socogim beach », for the most solvent clients of the most influential banks (Choplin, 2009). Obviously, social housing projects are not any more the priority of authorities.

In addition, when the State is not directly the property developer (Socogim case), it is promoting private investments with new legislation. In 2005, a law recognized officially the property developer profession. Since then, companies offer investments and short-term capital speculation (in real estate) or long-term capital speculation (in land). FCI is one of those societies, proposing investment funds, via its real estate subsidiary

“I’mar”. This company attempts to follow the Islamic financial principles, extremely popular within the Arabian Peninsula, promoting an “Islamic” quarter in the suburbs of Nouakchott. The future quarter, called “*Sukuk*”, is visible on the website (<http://www.imar.mr>): 50 villas, 60 allotments, and a central plot of 4 650 m<sup>2</sup> to become a central business district. The naming of this suburb connotes the diffusion of Islamic financial principles largely guided by those of the Middle East. The *sukuk* investment funds, developed by I’mar Company, are structured in compliance with Islamic law<sup>viii</sup>. The sale of *sukuk* (Arabic plural. “title”) is primarily directed at Islamic investors who are prohibited by Shari’a law from investing in conventional debt securities. Under these terms there is no risk of usury or earning interest on money loaning. As Ould Bah and Ould Cheikh (2009) write, even in Mauritania, “the pious local economy is increasingly connected to the vast network of the Islamic globalized finance”. The *sukuk* example demonstrates that international dynamics can converge with national interests. Urban changes are not only produced by foreign investments but by a subtle blending of the different interests of public and private actors. It is noteworthy that the State is augmenting its power to control land. Thus, it cannot be considered a victim of privatization precisely because it is instrumental in this process of privatization, which constitutes an easy manner to accrue instantaneous monetary wealth.

Fig. 2: Socogim Beach, Nouakchott



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Figure 3 : Main real estate projects in Nouakchott

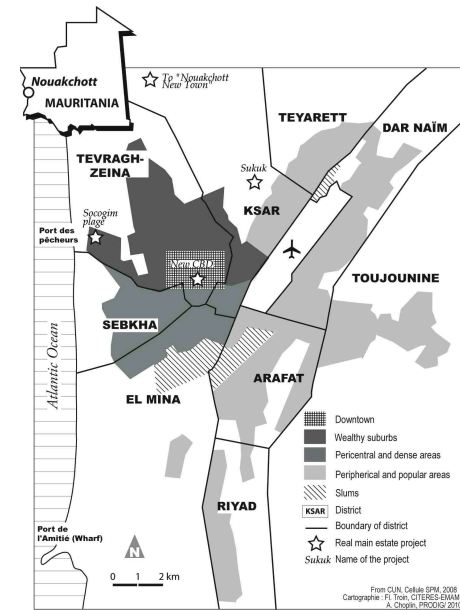


Fig. 4: “Sukuk” Project, in the sandy outskirts of Nouakchott



The plots are ready to be sold to private investors.  
 The central area will be transformed into a central business district.  
 Kite aerial photography, December 2009, © Collectif En Haut!  
[http://www.mauritanie-decouverte.net/nouakchott\\_vue\\_du\\_ciel/index.html](http://www.mauritanie-decouverte.net/nouakchott_vue_du_ciel/index.html)

However, in December 2009, three years after the project’s inception, only seven houses have been built. Whereas the *Sukuk* northern suburb is awaiting the demand of buyers, the Qatari program “Nouakchott new town” seems to be on hold. In November 2009, the Diar Mauritanian representative was awaiting a delegation. He stated: “*The project will go on. We have been delayed because of the last coup d’état. With the latest political unrest, water and electricity networks remain unconnected. But, the master plan (realized by the French society Vinci) has been passed*”. In response to our query about the possibility of the project coming to a halt due to the international financial crisis, he answered: “*the project has not been interrupted but has been revised proceeding from bottom-up. First, we will focus on the five star hotel (200 000 \$US)*.” Despite such reassurances, by December 2009, the Mauritanian project had disappeared from the Diar Website with the Diar representative still awaiting the delegation... In Nouakchott and Khartoum, the main prestige projects are precisely “projects”. This infers that until present they remain only in announcement form. On their websites, one observes that the master plans are “coming soon”. Declarations of cooperation are rife and signed agreements do not always culminate in tangible achieved projects.

Figure 5: comparative table of projects in both cities

	KHARTOUM			NOUAKCHOTT		
	Al Mogran	Medinat al-Nour	Tuti	Socogim plage	Diar	Sukuk
<b>Developers</b>	Alsunut development company	Medinat al-Nour company	Tuti Island Investment private company	SOCO GIM	Diar company	l’mar company
<b>Investment</b>	4 billion \$	7 billion \$	5 billion \$	12 million \$	1 million \$	3 millions \$
<b>Main partnerships</b>	PPP: DAL Co., Khartoum State and the National Social Insurance Fund	PPP: Grand Real estate company and Khartoum State	Private investments	PPP: Public real estate program + banks agreements	Private investments	PPP: FCI company, Mauritanian state, Shelter Afrique (international real estate investor)
<b>Type of projects</b>	Economic, commercial, residential and leisure resort	Economic, commercial, residential and leisure resort	Economic, commercial, residential and leisure resort	Residential project	Economic, commercial, residential and leisure resort	Economic and residential resort
<b>Origins of contractors</b>	Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Malaysia	Koweit, Egypt,	Sudan, Egypt, Koweit, Malaysia, China	Mauritanian	Qatari	Mauritanian
<b>Infra structures</b>	a central business district, 1 100 villas, 6 700 apartments, a marina and a golf course	120 000 000m <sup>2</sup> Shopping malls, office blocks, high rise accommodation, a zoo and a golf course	Residential Road networks	400 villas high-standing	A 5 star hotel, and luxurious villas	50 villas, 60 allotments, a central business district
<b>Websites</b>	<a href="http://www.alsunut.sd/">http://www.alsunut.sd/</a>	<a href="http://ipc-kwt.com/al-noor.html">http://ipc-kwt.com/al-noor.html</a>	<a href="http://www.tuti-island.com/medi-a.html">http://www.tuti-island.com/medi-a.html</a>	<a href="http://www.socogim.mr/accueil.htm">http://www.socogim.mr/accueil.htm</a>	<a href="http://www.qataridiar.com/">http://www.qataridiar.com/</a>	<a href="http://www.lmar.mr">http://www.lmar.mr</a>

It is noteworthy that these “turnkey projects” follow international principles, deploying Anglo-Saxon terminology (*expert, benchmarking, master plan, workshops, waterfront...*), inspired from managerial and consulting processes (Barthel, 2008; Barthel, Verdeil, 2008). At the same time, companies are trying to adapt these international tools to local contexts. For instance, architectural styles evoke Arab cultural and historical influences and the project names are often Arabic signifiers (*Al-Khaima* center refers to the nomadic tent; *Burj al-Fatih* takes on the name of Qadhafi’s revolution in 1969...). Indeed, some urban areas seem to be transposed segments of Dubai, complying with international standards. The international standards are embodied in the use of videos, websites and futuristic images as marketing props. Gaining access to these master plans and internet sites, that portray an ideal and simplistic picture of these iconically pharaonic projects, remains easy. By contrast, gaining more substantial information about their conception, the financial quandaries at their core, the identities of the diverse partners, the nature of the project management and the contracting owner, turns out to be a more delicate undertaking. The various actors are really reticent to divulge such information.

### 3. To whom does the city belong?

This use (and abuse) of marketing tools invite us to go beyond the simple images and basic rhetoric in order to analyse the side effects on local context and populations. Gazing upon the advertising spots depicting the “urban future”, one might venture to ask to whom exactly is this city destined? For whom are these extravagant spaces provided? Arab investors? Local inhabitants? Moreover, we speculate why the central government and private investors desire to beautify and upgrade the cityscape when the majority of its inhabitants remain impoverished and in need of low-income housing projects. The obvious response would suggest that the priorities of citizens are not taken into account in this lifestyle vision of luxury and entertainment. Therefore, such advertising strategies stand in stark contrast with the needs and realities imposed by the national context. In Mauritania, any proclaimed steps towards modernity and prosperity are unfortunately taking a long time to bear the fruit of improving the everyday living conditions of normal citizens (Choplin, 2010). Indeed, the political video used by the new president during the last elections seems to be excessively extravagant, exaggerated and unrealistic. For the larger majority of Mauritians and Sudanese, the promise of globalization gives rise to heightened frustration since it appears to be more symbolic than real. These expectations create a kind of apprehension and at the same time a huge desire to participate in this phenomenon of globalization. The new urban projects are characterized by paradox and ambiguity: on the one hand, they symbolize luxury and unabashed consumerism and on the other hand, modernity and hope.

Moreover, the increase in competition over urban projects has sparked local conflicts over land possession. In Sudan, this phenomena is marked by a brand new building bearing the sign “*Administration for conflict resolution*”. Indeed, the fact that most of the projects are being erected on agricultural lands has changed the legal classification of the plots being exploited<sup>ix</sup>. This engenders conflicts surrounding their appropriation. In 2001, while the restriction of agricultural activity at Mogran did not trigger off an important revolt, we met some farmers, angry yet powerless to claim the right to stay on their land (Franck, 2007). In contrast, in January 2009, the project envisaged as *Medinat al Noor* elicited the first expletive outcry related to the use of land. The national newspaper *al-Watan* consecrates two of its cover stories to this topic<sup>x</sup>. The fact that valuable land is being transformed into a construction site would provoke the discontent of the owners with the decisions taken by the State of Khartoum to reclaim this land. The evicted owners would rise up in particular against the manner in which the authorities were meeting their target by selling the plots to a Kuwaiti company. They have authorised the beginning of construction work before ensuring that the previous owners have been compensated as well as neglecting to ensure that grievances taken to court have been addressed. In order to be audible and visible, the previous owners physically occupy the land already under construction. They vocalised their complaints by stating that they had neither been accorded adequate notice of their eviction nor been compensated before the actual sale of the land they occupied in 2006. They quoted that both elements were clearly stipulated by law and thus such behaviour was in direct contradiction to the legal frameworks of the State. This complaint was reverberated

outside the confines of the *Abu Se'id* area and markedly implicated land owners from the south west of the capital until Jebel Aulia affected by both this project and that of the construction of the new airport.

Thus, step-by-step, in Khartoum, the political and business elite have designed a closed city, characterized by landscaped buffers, gated communities and residential enclaves, as is clearly demonstrated in the Al-Mogran project (Crombé, 2009). Whatever the intent, such choices have indirectly created a security belt that is taking form by isolating the urban air-conditioned elite and the lower strata of society from each other. These urban and political choices wilfully encourage fragmentation: the centre is no longer characterized by a *shared public place* but has become a *place to be shared*, between those having private interests. Accordingly, this globalization process is limited to selected spaces as well as people. In exclusively targeting the affluent, such projects contribute to the emergence of a model in contrast to the sustainable city and the “just city”, characterized by “material equality, diversity and democracy” (Fainstein, 2009; Marcuse, 2009, Harvey, 2009). Essentially based on social injustice, we can ask what is the sustainability of such cities that create schisms by focusing solely on the “beautiful city” desires of a rich minority.

From a different vantage point, these ambitious projects are equally vulnerable to the risk of being non-financially viable. Clearly, for the large majority of the local population the purchase of luxurious apartments is marked by superfluity. The volume of the local elite and the expatriate community is insufficient to cover the capital expenditure. The threshold of profitability is very high. Moreover, the effectiveness and feasibility become all the more pertinent. For instance, one might exercise a certain amount of scepticism regarding the master plans for Tuti Island. The three proposed plans completely disregard both the historical record of the island pertaining to land use as well as its uses in the very recent past. In the video imagery, the village has been obliterated, and the agricultural plots of land (still distributed in terms of irrigation units) are invisible. We are neither provided with the information explaining how the totality of this land is subject to complex rules of fragmentation directly guided by the precepts of Islamic inheritance law. Nor is it clarified that the complexity of this law accounts for a multitude of landowners on the island. By being presented in a sanitized and unproblematic process through the visual media, these projects seem to lose any authentic connection to the realities, characterized by land use micro-politics, cultural and financial stakes. Hence they become entirely *deterritorialised* virtual images standing outside the time and place they purport to represent.



Source : (<http://www.tuti-island.com/media.html>).  
In each pattern, the village is relocated, as if it was a simple infrastructure.

Faced with these images, it is pertinent to question the future prospects of these urban modern clusters and the fate of the city in general. While such urban projects clearly target the affluent members of the local society, this does not eliminate the possibility that the city dwellers might take it upon themselves to appropriate these prestigious areas. For instance, in Khartoum, in largely unanticipated ways, the upmarket shopping mall *Afra* has increasingly become a social space and an attraction point for many citizens, including modest and poor ones. This idea is also valid for a trendy café constructed on one of the roundabouts in downtown. The success of this enterprise has certainly inspired a vogue that makes use of structures in the urban landscape as meeting points, spaces to have picnics and to consume Coca-cola... Similarly in Nouakchott, while the completion of the *sukuk* project is awaited, the local population takes advantage of this electrified area. Hence, it makes use of this empty space in the evenings to play cards or have tea underneath lighting provided by street lamps.

In less than ten years, the faces of Khartoum and Nouakchott have changed due to the injection of billion dollar construction projects. Therefore, the oil discovery and globalization has provoked a spatial reversal: Sudan and Mauritania's marginal positions have become an advantage. Obviously, such new strategic geo-political situation and connections entail important spatial and identity changes. Thanks to these two examples, we note how the capital city has become the showcase of internationalisation, a tool for attracting capital flow and for generating new inward investments and speculation on

land tenure (Berry-Chikhaoui, Deboulet, Roulleau-Berger, 2007). As the envisioned future morphologies of Nouakchott and Khartoum illustrate, these cities are striving to be competitive spaces in the globalizing economy<sup>xi</sup>. The modernity embodied in the Emirates states appears as the exclusive path towards modernisation. In spite of the differences – between the two countries - in policies, projects, the amount of money invested and the stage of the process (more advanced in Sudan), both are enduring the same influences.

At present, both Nouakchott and Khartoum are looking forward to a future that may appear ephemeral. The comparison with Dubai as the quintessential post-petroleum city (Lavergne, 2009) stops short. In 2010, the Dubai urban-financial system has collapsed, echoing the transient nature of such projects. In light of the current global economic uncertainty, the potential investors and private firms could firstly withdraw from the margins of the Arab world. Recently strategic, this marginal position can become a cause of instability and fragility. Moreover, facing political and social unrest and poverty, it is increasingly difficult to believe in the feasibility of such prestige urban projects and in the possibility of their full achievement. Some of them, as Sukuk and Qatar Diar ones in Mauritania, are already delayed. Was it a brief glimpse of Dubai...?

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<sup>ii</sup> The article is based on research evidence collected during long-lasting fieldworks in Sudan and Mauritania. A. Franck carried out a 4 years fieldwork in Sudan between 2001 and 2005 for her PhD (Franck, 2007) and again in 2009. A. Choplin's fieldwork experience in Sudan consists of two fields research in 2003 and 2005, and of regular fieldworks in Mauritania (20 months), from 2000 to the present (Choplin, 2006). This article relies on data gathered during interviews with companies' managers, civil servants in charge of urbanism and inhabitants.

<sup>iii</sup> In January 2005, a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed between the central government of Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) which has struggled for the independence of the South. As specified in the CPA, the Southern Sudanese have the right to decide whether Southern Sudan will become an independent nation or whether it will remain part of a unified Sudan in January 2011.

<sup>iv</sup> Interview, Nouakchott, 22/01/2009

<sup>v</sup> The DAL Group consists of independent companies operating in the consumer, industrial, agricultural and property development sectors, with each offshoot playing a leading role in its own field. They distribute Coca Cola, and represent Mitsubishi group, Caterpillar...

<sup>vi</sup> « Khartoum investors eye Tuti Island », *Middle East Online*, 2008-03-24, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=25011>

<sup>vii</sup> Socogim: Société nationale de construction et de gestion immobilière

<sup>viii</sup> See « Finance islamique : les Sukuk gagnent du terrain », *La tribune n°416*, 20/09/08 ; « Interview M. Issa Cheiguer, PDG FCI », *World Investment news*, 02/04/2008

<sup>ix</sup> Agricultural land s measured in *feddans* (hectares) whereas land reserved for construction is measured in m<sup>2</sup>. In consequence, the compensation paid to evicted agriculturalists is derisory in relation to the value of resale.

<sup>x</sup> "The matter of compensation following the reclamation of the *sawagui* of Abu Se'id" *Al-Watan*, 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2009. "Land owners of Abu Se'id lay siege to the construction site of *Medinat al Noor*" *Al - Watan*, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2009.

<sup>xi</sup> It is noteworthy that Mauritanian and Sudanese presidents, Mohamed Ould Abdel Azziz and Omar Al-Bachir met them in Nouakchott in December 2009. They planned to reinforce the economic cooperation.