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Visualizing the Margins of Gulf Cities
M. Benchetrit, R. Stadnicki

This work is the product of a two-months field mission in 2011 across the urban outskirts of Sana'a (Yemen), Doha (Qatar), Muscat and Sohar (Oman), Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman and Ras Al-Khaymah (UAE). Photographer Manuel Benchetrit and geographer Roman Stadnicki collaborated on this geo-photographic project that explores the emerging urban territories of the Arabian Peninsula and is the result of a dialogue between a scientific viewpoint and an artistic perception.

This work looks at idealized urban forms that are either imitations of regional models or exaggerated copies of foreign dreamlands. A fast-paced process alternates construction and demolition, sometimes resulting in the visual strata that our work intends to show. Public enthusiasm for novelty coincides with a growing interest in reinvented heritage and national identity, which contrast with more versatile wider historic and social realities. This contrast contributes to a dissonance in urban visual environments, with billboards advertising brand-new heritage villages for the middle class, while labor migrants appropriate traditional houses. A similar contrast is offered by the landscape of an urban mega-project, in front of which one sees the buses that shuttle immigrant construction workers every day. Deluxe compounds grew up to house the white-collar expat work force, and are as geographically isolated and compartmentalized as the labor camps built by the authorities in the suburbs for the largest construction projects' workers

In this context of dissonance and contrast, urban practices and projects meet at the intersection of dreams and playfulness, through house ornaments, street games, gleaming mall interiors, a minimalist but richly lit Ferris wheels, concrete wind towers, and more.

All photos in this series were initially shown at the NYUAD New York University Institute in Abu Dhabi as pigment prints on Arches paper, mounted on aluminum, 40 x 60cm.



1. WADI MUSHAYRIB, DOHA (QATAR)

This luxury hotel is separated from its surroundings and offers a variety of services in a self-sufficient environment. One block away, the area of Mushayrib used to host trade shops managed by working class foreigners. Mushayrib, with its open and porous nature, did not resist the assault of the hotel's comfort and amenities. The destruction of Mushayrib to the benefit of Dohaland, a high standard urban area for housing, shops and offices, is now almost complete; but the extent of the destruction is invisible from the street. Awaiting their turn, the facades block the perspective on a vast field of debris. Some of the residents of Mushayrib were invited to move to Al-Barwa Village (see photo 6).



2. SATWA, DUBAI (UAE)

Satwa is a working class area near the center of Dubai. Its proximity to the skyline provokes strong visual contrasts. The area is home to one of the most important Asian working communities (Indian, Pakistanis, Nepalese, and Bangladeshis, etc.) of the city. Because of a strong inflation, rents continue to rise despite the precariousness of the housing. Meanwhile, several renovation projects all around this area, which result in the destruction of these popular houses, are a source of anxiety for the inhabitants of Satwa.



3. ASIR, SANA'A (YEMEN)

Ferris Wheel in the “Dreamland” theme park overlooking Sana’a. Concentric rays of lights and the glow of the city seem to intertwine. The wheel is quite small and probably produced by hand: « and thus symbolically offers a small-scale preview of the entertainment business in the rest of the peninsula, it also evokes how the rest of the peninsula can be a model in terms of urban aesthetics and functions »



4. AL RIFAH, SHARJAH (UAE)

This is a construction site at the border between Ajman and Sharjah. The grounds of a former building, probably a sport facility, are bound to be buried like a soon-to-be archeological relic. A little further, the financial crisis seems to have interrupted a real estate project. This temporary wavering between covering, destroying, and building again looks like a geological cross-section and reflects the everlasting stratification of urban projects. One observes here the blended effects of urbanization's sudden acceleration and slowing down.



5. THE PEARL, DOHA (QATAR)

Workers' buses are parked in front of the Pearl, an artificial island on the northern outskirts of town that supports a gigantic tourist and residential complex. These vehicles choreograph the dance of the laborers who are jolted along at fixed hours from their labor camp to the building site. This flow, of which the buses are a mechanical part, seems like a pendulum movement or a clockwork pulse.



6. BARWA VILLAGE, DOHA (QATAR)

This brand-new village in the southeast of the city was built to house some of the shopkeepers of the now demolished Wadi Mushayrib neighborhood, in the center of the city (see photo 1). The relocation operation seems bound to fail. In this area, rents are higher, customers fewer and official accommodation is reserved only for families. Single traders — the majority of workers in the area — are left with restricted housing options, lack of access to amenities, services and shops.



7. AL WAAB, DOHA (QATAR)

This gated community in the western suburb of Doha is a closed compound. The residents' exclusive way of life expresses itself in fences, self-segregation and the use of private vehicles and exclusive amenities. Doha is probably one of the most spatially segregated cities in the world. Even interpenetrations between the various compartmentalized communities are regulated. For instance, the construction laborers have to wait until middle class residents leave their compound to start working on new constructions in the mornings.



8. THE VILLAGIO MALL, DOHA (QATAR)

Venetian canals were first imitated by Coney Island's Dreamland in 1904. The model has influenced other developments, from Las Vegas to Dubai and to Doha's Villagio. Several malls in the region are characterized by signature themes such as ancient Egypt, the travels of Ibn Batuta, or Marco Polo's hometown. The Villagio is strategically located among upper class gated communities, and begs the following questions: do middle class residents flock to malls because they feel they are unfit for the outside environment, its heat, and its cultural differences from their culture origin? Do they come to enjoy the dream of a tri-dimensional postcard that is even more controlled and more reassuring than the original? In May 2012, the Villagio mall burned down and 19 people died in the fire.



9. RAS AL KHAYMAH (UAE)

Al Mamurah is an historical area of Ras Al-Khaymah that is mostly inhabited by migrant laborers. Away from heritage villages, this image suggests that vernacular architecture doesn't attract much attention, despite an official placard pointing out that it's 'Reserved for Archaeology Authority'. These historic premises are reproduced and glorified as authentic local architecture in heritage villages. Yet most of their current tenants are foreigners.



10. AL BIDDA, DOHA (QATAR)

The construction of heritage villages oddly accompanies the race for novelty. In Doha, spaces that glorify the national heritage emulate forms from the past but use modern materials. The recreation of ancient models seems to indicate a desire to reduce the overriding presence of foreign influences in the public space. The march towards novelty and conservation is part of a larger philosophical dialectic between imitation and model, juxtaposition and replacement.

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