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Re_Urbanism: Transforming Capitals

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Extrastatecraft

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The nation-state often portrays itself and its network of capital cities as an ultimate form. Yet as power amasses and disperses in recurring patterns as it has throughout the ages, the world's capitals preside over empires and regions as well as nations. Some are city-states unto themselves.



In the fabled pairing of, for instance, Beijing and Shanghai, Washington, D.C., and New York, Ankara and Istanbul, the national capital is the more sober inland location that stands in contrast to its market partner, often a maritime city with a long record of promiscuous trading and cosmopolitan intelligence. The mercantile city is sometimes cast as the sister city or the shadow entity, seemingly ceding power and official jurisdiction so that it can grow extranational power outside of the cumbersome regulations of government. Yet contemporary versions of this sister city are not merely alter egos of the national capital but often something more like independent city-states—the descendants of Venice or Genoa when they were the trading centers of the planet. Recombining urban power genetics into yet another species of urbanism, they exceed the interests of global financial centers such as London, New York, Frankfurt, or São Paulo.¹ They also exceed the requirements of the fabled “region state”—the financial and transshipment nexus of late twentieth-century globalization theory.² Some contemporary world cities like Hong Kong and Singapore are not only the crossroads and destinations of national expedition and franchise but also the centers of global franchises that have property nested in holding companies and national territories all around the world. Their franchise agents may be global trade conglomerates (e.g., Singapore’s PSA or Hong Kong’s Hutchison Port Holdings) which are the modern descendants of organizations like the Dutch or the British East India companies. Merging the techniques of free-port traders, pirates, and mercenaries, the free zones of the new world city create legal habitats for contemporary trade that naturalize the insertion of extranational territory within national boundaries.

While Western superpowers have perhaps grown accustomed to the idea that world cities like Singapore or Hong Kong are much more than the product of their own colonial ventriloquism, an emergent world city like Dubai presents an unusual political foundation and an abrupt conflation of ancient and contemporary worlds. The usual pairing of Abu Dhabi and Dubai as capital city and mercantile city, respectively, would appear at first to follow familiar models. The two play their roles well until it becomes clear they are both capital city and world city in another time and dimension. The UAE is a federation of some of the world’s last functioning kingdoms, seemingly asleep during the most bombastic chapters in the grand history of national sovereignty. During the very centuries that nations have emerged as a dominant framework, so too have substantial networks of transnational business exchange and infrastructure-building. The UAE is reawakened by oil at a moment when nations bluster patriotic while also developing more relationships in this transnational milieu. Already an “anational society,” the UAE is evolving, within the legal climates of free trade, a form of governance for which national/democratic structures are mimicked for use in organizing dynasties.³ Mixtures of bargains and monarchical decrees are designed to handle global dealings with businesses that have managed to shed some of the most cumbersome national regulations that the UAE never possessed. In these dealings, ancient kingdoms and contemporary empires recognize and merge with each other to form a world capital of sorts.

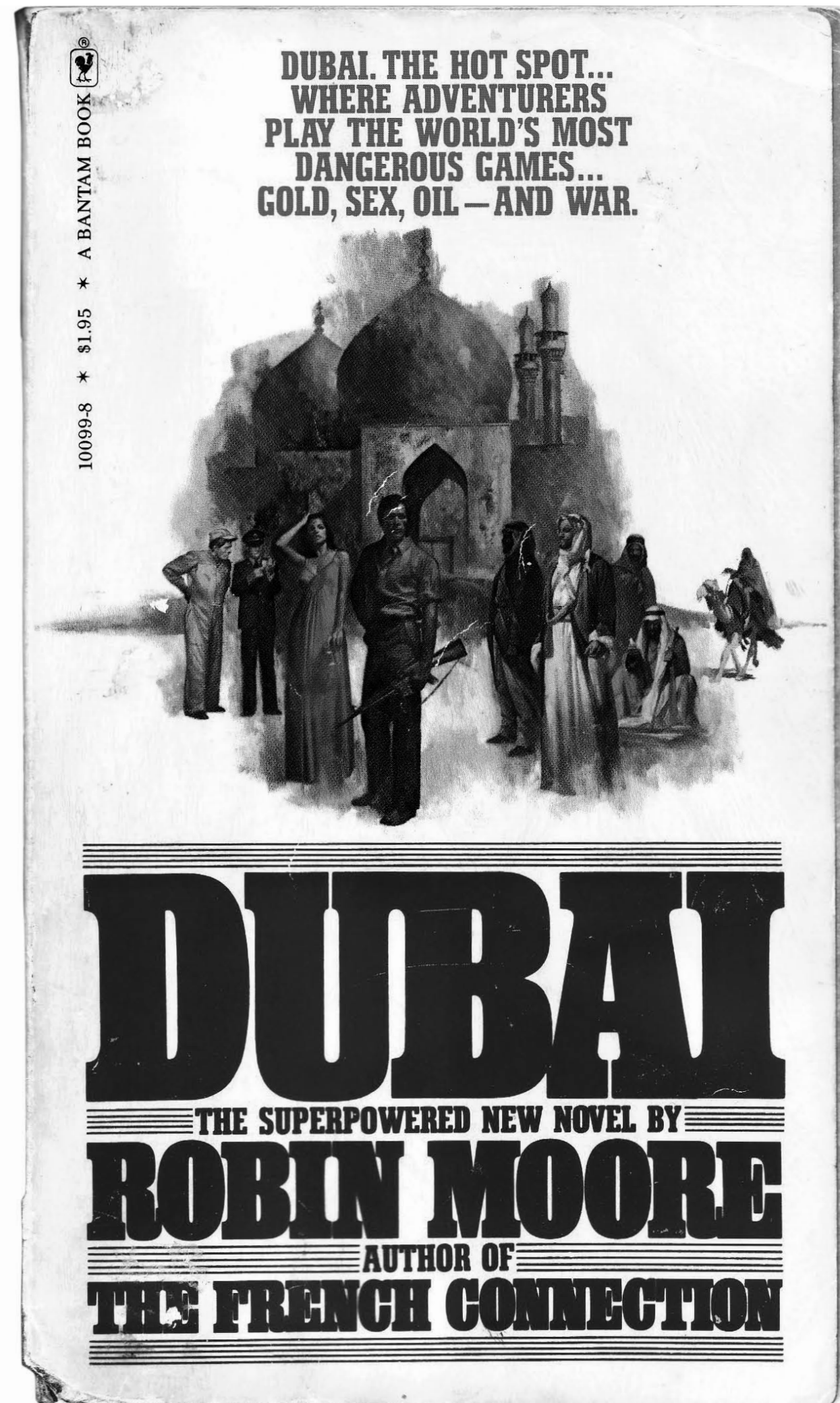
The presence of world capitals like Dubai does not support the assumption that transnational sovereignty is waxing as national sovereignty wanes. It may be more accurate to see a historical continuity of global activity within which state and nonstate forces, acting together, craft the most advantageous political and economic climates by alternately sheltering, releasing, and laundering their power. Business may, for instance, seek out relaxed, extrajurisdictional spaces (SEZs, FTZs, EPZs, etc.) while also massaging legislation in the various states they occupy (NAFTA, GATT). The stances of any one nation or business are therefore often duplicitous or discrepant reflections of divided loyalties between national and international concerns or citizens and shareholders.

The customary portfolios of political indicators will not always reliably return information about these complex state-nonstate partnerships. They often create political events that exceed epistemes of war, nation, citizen, and capital. In a contemplation of world capitals, the UAE exposes the limits of the national capital as a self-styled unit of grand historical continuities. With the insulated caprice of petro dollars and free zones, the UAE leads with the increasingly common duplicitous handshake. The triggers and levers of this power may not be easily moralized and analyzed by the left or the right; they may be more venal and evasive as well as more shrewd and innovative. The UAE embodies a transnational *extrastatecraft* filled with both the dangers and opportunities that rule the world today.

¹ Credit might naturally go to Peter Hall and his book *The World Cities* (1971) or to Saskia Sassen’s *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. This train of thought is however closer to an analysis offered by Roland Marchal, “Dubai: Global City and Transnational Hub,” in Madawi Al-Rasheed, ed., *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf* (London: Routledge, 2003), 93–110. Marchal uses the term *world cities* in reference to Fernand Braudel’s work on city-states and trading capitals from Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life: Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), reprinted from 1979 Librairie Armand Colin, Paris.

² Kenichi Ohmae, “The Rise of the Region State” in Patrick O’Meara, Howard Mehlinger, and Matthew Krain, eds., *Globalization and the Challenges of a New Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

³ Frederick F. Anscombe, “An Anational Society: Eastern Arabia in the Ottoman Period,” quoted in Marchal, 21–35.



Dubai. The hot spot...Where adventurers play the world’s most dangerous games...Gold, sex, oil—and war.

Dubai. A wild, seething place in the sunbaked sands of Arabia, where billion-dollar carpet-baggers mix explosive passions with oil. And exotic pleasures pay fabulous dividends.

Whores, assassins, spies, fortune hunters, diplomats, princes and pimps—all gambling for their lives in a dazzling, billion-dollar game that only the most ruthless and beautiful dare to play.⁴

—Jacket copy from *Dubai*, by Robin Moore

In 1976, after *The Green Berets*, *The French Connection*, and several other global intrigues, Robin Moore published a novel titled *Dubai*. The novel opens in 1967. Fitz, the monosyllabic hero and American intelligence officer, is fired over his pro-Palestinian/anti-Semitic remarks that appear in the press just as the Six Day War is launched. Dubai, like the not-yet-middle-aged protagonist, is still fluid and unsettled. It is still a place where adventures and deals are flipped and leveraged against each other to propel small syndicates to fame and fortune. Fitz quickly scales a succession of events in the UAE’s history during the 1970s. He arrives when a handful of hotels and the new Maktoum Bridge across Dubai Creek are among the few structures that appear in an otherwise ancient landscape, one that has changed very little in the centuries that Dubai has been an entrepôt of gold trade and a site for pearl diving. Just on the edge of Sheikh Rashid’s plans for an electrical grid, the air-conditioning in Fitz’s Jumeirah beach house must struggle against the 120 degrees and 100 percent humidity by means of an independent generator. The story proceeds by moving in and out of air-conditioning, syndicate meetings, and sex scenes in the palaces of the sheikh or in hotel cocktail lounges between Tehran, Dubai, and Washington. The tawdry glamour of tinkling ice and Range Rovers is frequently interrupted for a number of rough-and-tumble adventures that are evenly distributed throughout the book. The discovery of oil has already propelled the development of the Trucial States (states that have made maritime truces with the original oilmen, the British).

Fitz’s first escapade uses the old gold economy to capitalize on the new oil and real estate economy. The syndicate’s *dhow* (the traditional vessel on the creek) is souped up with munitions and technology that Fitz has illegally stolen from the American military. Dubai is an old hand at smuggling, or what it likes to call “re-export,” during embargoes or wars that are always available in the Gulf. Shipping gold to India usually involves armed encounters in international waters. The *dhow*’s U.S. military equipment vaporizes the Indian ships, thus trouncing piracy and resistance to the free market. Fitz plunders enough money to bargain with the sheikh for shares of an oil enterprise in Abu Musa, an island in the Gulf halfway between Dubai and Iran. He has enough money left over to finance a saloon, equipped with old CIA bugging devices, and an upstairs office with a one-way viewing window. From this perch Fitz entertains the growing number of foreign businessmen who are laying over in Dubai and the growing number of Arab businessmen who want to see and approach Western women. He continues in his plot to become a diplomat to the new independent federation of Trucial territories, the United Arab Emirates, to be established in 1971.

Fitz (like Dubai) gets things done. With a wink and a nod sheikhs and diplomats reward him. He even manages to single-handedly crush a communist insurgency in the desert (most Robin Moore novels fight the old Cold War fight, although his most recent forays take on the new devil: terrorism). In the novel, America’s heroic Cold War deeds in the Gulf have made us simple lovable heroes with both naughtiness and vulnerability. Fitz wisely realizes that most political activities are not vetted through recognized political channels. In *Dubai*,

⁴ Robin Moore, *Dubai* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), frontispiece.

the naughty hero formula even goes one dyspeptic step further in engineering sympathy for the character and happily signal the end of the novel: Fitz hurts his leg fighting the insurgency. Despite his wounds and even though he has contributed a suitcase full of money in campaign contributions, he doesn’t get the ambassadorship. He is unfairly tainted with the centuries of regional piracy and the only too recent hotel-bar intrigues. Nevertheless, Fitz gets the girl in the end, the daughter of a diplomat living on the Main Line in Philadelphia, and they begin to plan their middle-aged life “on the creek” in Dubai.

The novel’s oblivious mix of Cold War piety and soft porn is, however fictional, appropriate evidence. Indeed, the novel is strangely more informative than most of what is currently written about the United Arab Emirates in its own self-produced coffee-table books and marketing copy. The country is currently producing a dazzling story of real estate development for the consumption of an obedient press that reproduces its sound bytes. Even snide and brainy bloggers of architectural critique have assembled willingly in the trap, printing enthusiastic remarks about hyperbolic development projects. Most accounts are looking for yet another big opener to top the last story about new offshore islands, theme parks or shopping festivals—another prefix meaning superlative to “mega.” The Emirates get things done in a fast-forward time lapse of oil wealth. The coffee-table books do not present the complicated history of foreign paternalizing, meddling, and arming that has matured into something very different from what either the U.S. or the UK thought they have wrought. For some time, the U.S. and the UK have perhaps behaved as if the UAE was simply an outcropping of Western real estate techniques, occasionally offering condescending praise that the Emirates have been an exceptionally good pupil. The UAE is happy to nod as if in gratitude and perfectly happy if the global press bites on that line. It may even be good for the real estate market.

Robin Moore’s *Dubai* ends in 1970, just before federation in 1971. Abu Dhabi and Dubai were sibling territories, offshoots of the Ban Yas tribe that migrated between pearl diving and the interior desert oasis of Al Ain. Abu Dhabi, a coastal archipelago with some fresh water, became the headquarters of the Al Nahyan family. In 1833, Sheikh Maktoum bin Butti led a group that seceded from Abu Dhabi to settle farther east along the coast in Dubai, a small fishing village, and the Maktoum family has ruled in

Dubai ever since.⁵ Since 1820, the British had entered into agreements with these coastal sheikhdoms to regulate piracy and other maritime concerns. In 1892, the so-called Trucial states signed a joint agreement establishing an exclusive relationship with Britain in exchange for its protection. American and British companies negotiated their first oil concessions in the late 1920s to mid-1930s. Still, Abu Dhabi did not begin to drill for oil until after World War II and did not discover commercial quantities of oil until 1958.⁶ Soon it would become clear that Abu Dhabi was dominant in not only land area but also oil production. Dubai, endowed with far fewer oil resources, did not export oil until 1969. Even early on, Dubai planned to pursue tourism, finance, and trade as its chief sources of revenue.⁷ When the British pulled out of the territories east of the Suez in 1968, the UAE was flooded with foreign businessmen from all over the world, and the Range Rovers gave way to Japanese cars.⁸ Yet, well into the 1960s, the Trucial states were barefoot, with no roads or health care, few clothes, and brackish water.

We lived in the eighteenth century while the rest of the world, even the rest of our neighbors, had advance into the twentieth.

We had nothing to offer visitors, we had nothing to export, we had no importance to the outside world whatsoever. Poverty, illiteracy, poor health, a high rate of mortality all plagued us well into the 1960s.⁹

The business of government is manufacturing opportunity.

—General Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashid Al Maktoum¹⁰

As a kingdom-nation, the UAE produces partial reflections and tinctures of Western governmental institutions, yet it operates with

a different set of civil and legal assumptions. Moreover, these significant structural differences often allow the country to thrive off of many of the very complications that trouble Western democracies: the contradiction between citizenship and the need for cheap labor; the curious position of public space within urbanism conceived as a privately themed spatial product; the naturalized state of exemption from law in corporate paradigms, and the influence of special interest in official political representation. As if in a state of amnesia for these perennial problems of contemporary participatory democracies, the UAE seems not to perceive them.

UAE nationals are not only a constituency to the representative body but a beneficiary, conduit, and pivot of much of the country’s business; they are at once the wealthy elite and the welfare state. While Dubai is currently pursuing an urbanism that is measured in the *Guinness Book of World* records (e.g., the world’s tallest building, the world’s largest man-made islands, the world’s largest shopping mall, and the world’s largest underwater hotel), Abu Dhabi also lays claim to a *Guinness* record made by one of its most legendary leaders: Sheikh Zayed was once offered the largest bribe in history. The Saudis offered him \$42 million to relinquish Abu Dhabi’s claim to Al Ain. Sheikh Zayed’s refusal during a time when even he himself had only a few hundred rupees was consistent with his commitment to manage Abu Dhabi’s ensuing wealth in a way that made its citizens beneficiaries. After becoming the ruler in 1966, Sheikh Zayed also issued land grants for each national, to ensure that development would benefit the population, and, by 1976, he had also offered 5,000 units of “people’s housing.”¹¹ The land grants are similar in principle to the many other laws that stipulate partnerships or enterprises in which UAE nationals are either associates or beneficiaries. “Offsets” are among these structuring devices. Defense contracts with the UAE must first negotiate with the UAE offsets group. The contracts must be profitable, and a UAE national must own 51 percent. Moreover, the contract must seed an offset venture in a non-oil industry. So far, these offset projects have funded a variety of industries including fish farms, air-conditioning, medical services, shipbuilding, and even leisure activities like polo grounds.¹² Since the number of nationals is small, the UAE has managed to convert the typically corrupt relationship between government and private-interest lobbies into a form

of hyper-representation.¹⁴ In Dubai, this direct benefit to a manageable handful of constituents is regarded as government welfare and beneficent leadership.

The UAE has found an advantage in the notion of the temporary citizen as laborer, expat, or tourist. As a temporary citizen, the tourist arrives to deposit vacation money at shopping festivals, golf tournaments, and theme parks. Having paid their taxes in tourist revenues, they then leave without further demands on government. The UAE has also institutionalized migratory labor arrangements, in some cases even using it as a source of fees and other revenue. UAE nationals were themselves the guest workers for oil companies before they essentially became partners in the oil wealth.¹⁵ Rules are established for managing and housing the labor in groups, and problems are the responsibility of the agent who has contracted for the labor. Laborers and contractors must agree to and abide by certain rules or be deported. Thus, Dubai can then boast that it is one of the most diverse places on earth as its curates its inhabitants from Africa, India, Pakistan, and elsewhere in the world. All of the arrangements are perhaps more transparent than in those countries where citizenship is the impossible option and the guest worker exists in a zone of denial and secrecy. Yet the arrangements have also yielded a situation devoid of responsibility and consequence, except for the outside contractors. Enforcement applies to the infraction of rules but not to procedures or events that exist outside of them. Human-rights concerns continue to center around the trafficking of human beings within a large volume of migratory workers as well as around the networks of domestic workers for whom there is no record keeping or oversight.

The UAE epitomizes the shadow jurisdictions that reside in transnational exchanges, out-maneuvering some official acts of state, and serving as de facto forms of global governance. Indeed if that shadow government is loosely defined by the scatter of headquarters and zones around the world, the UAE is something like a parliament of this global headquartering. The “park” or free trade zone is naturalized as the ideal urban growth unit. In recent decades, the free trade zone, export processing zone, special economic zone or other similar incarnations have evolved to allow businesses immunity from taxes, labor regulation and environmental restrictions or to streamline the logistics for transshipment, materials handling or duty-free retail.

Like any nation, the UAE publicizes its ennobling dispositions, often embodied by the partnership of Sheikh Zayed and Sheikh Rashid. Deploying a familiar modernist script, the two used technology for nation-building. Both Sheikh Zayed and Sheikh Rashid capitalized experimental projects that demonstrated their eagerness to diversify. Dubai sponsored a project that paired aluminum production and desalination. Sheikh Zayed sponsored the planting of millions of palm trees, planning to manage water and wildlife with the help of remote-sensing satellites. Since the modernist script usually comes with equal parts traditionalism, the UAE associated this technological expertise with a native wisdom about environment and natural resources. Accessorized with the perfect mix of modern signals and traditional customs such as falconry, horses, and camel racing, Sheikh Zayed’s leadership solicited general adoration, almost deification, until his death in 2004. His face appears everywhere, on billboards and talismans. To traditional music with a new-age beat, the official Web site celebrating his life follows the silhouette of a falcon across the sands from a silhouetted skyline of *barasti* mud huts to the silhouetted skyline of Dubai. Moreover, part of the UAE’s beguiling formula for government, involves generosity to the neediest countries in the world. By the mid-1970s the UAE and Sheikh Zayed had developed a reputation for philanthropy that was to become a permanent ingredient of the country’s mystique.¹⁶

As if in suspended animation or taking a break from the twentieth century, Abu Dhabi and Dubai might have seemed, in the 1990s, like sleepy holiday locations offering a growing number of modern developments, air-conditioned hotels, and office buildings. Both perhaps maintained the peculiar relaxation and freedom of a place where one does not stay long, but after the 1990s the difference between the two emirates and the two cities accelerated. In 1997, Dubai’s fabled development boom began when it allowed for freehold property for all nations in special development areas. In 2006, the emirate legalized foreign property ownership. Somewhat more sober, Abu Dhabi recently clarified its 2005 freehold laws by allowing only GCC nationals to own freehold property, while non-GCC members are required to have a contract for 99 years.¹⁷ Traveling between the emi-rates is a jolting journey forward and backward through time—between ancient landscapes, national capitals, and new world capitals.

The earth has a new center.

—Billboard advertisement for Dubai Mall on Sheikh Zayed Road

“Dubai is like someone who owns many horses,” he said. “He doesn’t just put one horse in the race, he puts many with many chances of success.”

—Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem, adviser to Dubai’s Maktoum family¹⁸

In 1979, Sheikh Rashid completed two projects in Dubai that established it as a regional capital of the Gulf and the Middle East: The World Trade Center and the Jebel Ali port.¹⁹ As Robin Moore’s novel spins around a corridor between Dubai and Tehran, it accurately reflects alignments of power, influence, and relationships that have caused Dubai to be called “the economic capital of Iran.”²⁰ The World Trade Center signaled a willingness to foster regional partners and reinforced the image of Dubai as a Gulf nexus. Situated at the border between Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the Jebel Ali port was the largest man-made port in the world. The free-trade zone permitted complete foreign ownership of land and no taxes. The stretch of development between the World Trade Center and Jebel Ali port, comparable to the length of Manhattan, has since been rapidly filling with a corridor of skyscrapers since 1990. This highway, called Sheikh Zayed Road on the Dubai side and Sheikh Rashid Road on the Abu Dhabi side, is a deferential handshake that is perhaps more unevenly extended as development in Dubai outpaces that of any other emirate.

Business practices that have long been familiar to the Gulf entrepôts but which have also emerged as contemporary global business models are the perfect accompaniment to Dubai’s overarching approach to trade. A city of warehousing, smuggling, and gold trading, Dubai was on the circuit of the Gulf’s Qawassim pirates, brought under control at approximately the same time that the Barbary pirates were defeated in the Mediterranean.²¹ More important than product stability has been the movement of volumes of goods. Products are best when they are capable of behaving like

⁵ Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates: A Society in Transition* (Dubai and Abu Dhabi: Motivate Publishing, 2004, first published by Longman, 1982), 174, 238.

⁶ Mohammed Al-Fahim, *From Rags to Riches: A Story of Abu Dhabi* (London: The London Center of Arab Studies, 1995), 73–74.

⁷ Heard-Bey, 238.

⁸ Al-Fahim, 147.

⁹ Al-Fahim, 88.

¹⁰ Essam Al Tamimi, *Setting up in Dubai* (Dubai: Cross Border Legal Publishing, 2003), 3.

¹¹ Moving west to northeast, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah are the first three emirates, and they each have a chief city of the same name. Continuing further north, toward the Straits of Hormuz, are the smaller emirates of Umm al Qaiwain, Ajman, and Ras al Khaimah. Finally, on the eastern coast of this rocky peninsula is the seventh emirate, Fujairah.

¹² Al-Fahim, 405.

¹³ See <http://www.state.gov/e/eb/1fd/2005/42194.htm>; <http://www.abudhabichamber.ae/user/SectionView.aspx?PNodeId=802>.

¹⁴ Only 18 percent of the population are UAE nationals. The majority of the population (65 percent) are Asians. <http://www.dataadubai.com/population.htm>.

¹⁵ Heard-Bey, 107.

¹⁶ Al-Fahim, 163.

¹⁷ See http://realestate.theemiratesnetwork.com/articles/freehold_property.php; <http://www.ameinfo.com/110401.html>.

¹⁸ *New York Times*, February 17, 2006, C1.

¹⁹ See [http://www.jafza.ae/jafza/](http://www.emporis.com/en/wm/bu/?id=107779); <http://www.dnrd.gov.ae/dnrd/Profile/JabalAliPort+.htm>; <http://www.dpworld.ae/jafz/jafz.htm>.

²⁰ <http://www.datadubai.com/population.htm>; and Marchal, 96. The population of the UAE is over 3 million and at least 70,000 UAE nationals have Iranian background. Marchal quotes Fariba Adelhkahl’s “Dubai, capitale économique de l’Iran,” in Roland Marchal, et al., eds., *Dubai, Cité Globale*, 39-55.

fluctuating currency. With more choices, more merchandise, and more labor from around the world, the odds are better for playing currency and wage differentials.

General Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, recently succeeded his brother Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who ruled from 1990 until his death in January 2006. Sheikh Mohammed has been for some time the mastermind behind the most recent chapters of hyperbolic development going on in Dubai. Underlining the important of duplicity to power, his Web site features four portraits of him at the top of the page: in traditional dress, in a business suit with glasses, in military uniform, and in casual sporting attire with sunglasses and a baseball cap. On his watch, Dubai has developed seven-star hotels and has pursued projects for which megaprojects are the subset. Dubailand, an enormous, 2 billion-square-foot tourist installation, will include 45 megaprojects and 200 subprojects. Traditional Nabati poetry is Sheikh Mohammed's competing passion. One of his most famous, written in 2003, was referred to as the Sixth Riddle and became the subject of a contest. No one was able to solve the riddle. The answer, as finally revealed by Sheikh Mohammed and after prizes were delivered for "several thousand" close answers, was "Dubai."²²

Dubai has rehearsed the "park" with almost every imaginable program, beginning with Dubai Internet City in 2000, the first IT campus as free-trade zone. Calling each new enclave a "city," it has either planned or built Dubai Health Care City, Dubai Maritime City, Dubai Silicon Oasis, Dubai Knowledge Village, Dubai Techno Park, Dubai Media City, Dubai Outsourcing Zone, Dubai Humanitarian City, Dubai Industrial City, Dubai International Financial Centre free zone, and Dubai Textile City.²³ Dubai is becoming one of the world's free zones, keeping everyone's secrets, researching everyone's forbidden products and procedures, and laundering global identities.

Dubai has also shared its real estate expertise with regional partners. On December 20, 2005, with Abu Dhabi as the host of the GCC summit, Sheikh Mohammed announced the commencement of work on King Abdullah Economic City, a man-made island formation to be built on the Red Sea coast just north of both Jeddah and Mecca.²⁴ The Dubai-based developer, Emaar, which claims to be the largest development company in the world, is sharing expertise they have gained building large, engineered islands along the coastline between Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The first of Dubai's largest man-made islands, Palm Island, was started in 2001 and is now to be joined by two more palm-frond-shaped formations, the Palm Jebel Ali and the Palm Deira. In the interim, The World, another archipelago of islands, this time in the shape of the world's continents, created a global media sensation. Island properties associated with their position on the globe were sold as private compounds to celebrities like Rod Stewart and Elton John. The World anticipated its own critique. Since governments legally engineer their own status as islands of immunity and exemption in free-trade zone loopholes, or archipelagoes, The World, as an archipelago of archipelagoes, is an extravagant global witicism that is advertised by its own potential critics. Similarly, mutations of Portman/Hines/Jerde malls and atrium hotels like Burj Al Arab, Dubai Mall (the largest mall in the world), or Ski Dubai, an indoor ski resort in a 120-degree desert, appear so quickly that they seem to exceed all expressed ambitions and critiques of the experience economy.

Dubai's recent acquisition of the UK's largest port conglomerate, Peninsular and Orient (P&O), reinforced the profile of Dubai as a world capital. The \$6.6 billion loan needed to acquire the company was the largest in Middle East history. Perhaps more importantly, the move reaches back through hundreds of years to Dubai's own history. Dubai World Port, or DubaiWP, and its intermediate acquisitions organ, Thunder, are still a possession of the Maktoum family. The story then becomes even more extreme as it once again returns the power of these large global franchises, vestiges of the old franchises and mercantile companies, to dynasty. When the deal encountered political obstacles in America, Dubai simply and quickly avoided these quaint negotiations of democracy.

"Many journalists have booked rooms in prestigious hotels here, but instead of covering the summit they have gone to Dubai to shop."

—A journalist from the Saudi delegation headquartered in Abu Dhabi for the GCC conference, 2005.²⁵

²¹ Heard-Bey, 68-72, 284-86.

²² See <http://www.sheikhmohammed.co.ae/english/index.asp>.

²³ See <http://www.dubaiinternetcity.com>; <http://www.arabsat.com/Default/About/OurHistory.aspx>; <http://www.dubaiholding.com/english/index.html>.

²⁴ See <http://www.kingabdullahcity.com/en/>.

²⁵ *Gulf News* (December 19, 2005).



Our long-term goal is to establish Abu Dhabi as a centre for development of new technology in energy. . . . We are looking forward to seeing Abu Dhabi as world capital of energy.²⁶

Passing across the border on Sheikh Zayed Road to Sheikh Rashid Road, the difference in political disposition is visually clear. The forest of skyscrapers gives way to cultivated palm trees and somewhat dated and earnest public-works buildings. Abu Dhabi's urbanism is more conservative. Tall buildings conform to a grid and regularly offer a very similar retail podium. The emirate invokes gravitas and tradition, playing the role of the more responsible sister, closer to the ecological and philanthropic ethos established by Sheikh Zayed. Sitting on a giant spout of oil, Abu Dhabi has no intention of competing with Dubai's world-capital ambitions. Still, it too must deliberately acquire components of culture that craft the correct global profile and provide more lasting sustenance than petro dollars. While Abu Dhabi borrows from Dubai some world-capital techniques for power-building, it will also work to strengthen its position as a regional/national capital. If the UAE is to become more than a source of oil, a temporary warehouse for goods, or a stopover for labor and tourists, it must send a variety of special signals to the rest of the world.

Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi, as the first female government minister of the UAE and a protégé of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, is one of these signals. Previously at the Dubai Port Authority and CEO of Tejari, an e-commerce company, she is now Minister of Economy and Planning for the nation. Among the present concerns is the need for jobs and leadership positions for the nationals who either immigrate to jobs elsewhere or have less expertise than foreign candidates.²⁷ Ailing economies in the larger region threaten stability and present some mutually beneficial opportunities for investment and philanthropy. The UAE must also partner with both national and corporate powers to sponsor innovation and simultaneously appropriate technological expertise. The raft of initiatives is designed to engage economies and power centers around the world.

While tourism is one avenue of growth, Abu Dhabi plans to distinguish itself from Dubai by being a center of culture and education. One new initiative, Saadiyat Island, will serve as demonstration of some of these new initiatives. Saadiyat Island, promoted as "half the size of Bermuda," will be home to one of the most contagious global spatial products for architourism and culture: the Guggenheim organization. Frank Gehry has agreed to provide a departure from the Bilbao franchise that is to be a reverie on sky and water.²⁸ With typical UAE hyperbole, GAD (Guggenheim Abu Dhabi) will be 25 percent larger than Bilbao and will be completed in 2012. A performing arts center by Zaha Hadid, a national museum by Jean Nouvel, and a maritime museum by Tadao Ando have also been commissioned. With these signature buildings in place, Saadiyat Island is to become an "international cultural hub for the Middle East on par with the best in the world."²⁹ The island will also include residential, business, education, and resort districts. There will be residential areas for 150,000 inhabitants, two golf courses, twenty-nine hotels, ecological preserves, and a marina for a thousand boats. All three phases and six districts of Saadiyat Island are to be completed by 2018. Perhaps as important as the museum franchise is the university franchise now becoming increasingly popular around the world as a tool of nation- and region-building. Not only museums but also educational institutions are being shaped as spatial products and inhabitants of zone enclaves. Saadiyat Island, like Education City in Qatar, King Abdullah Economic City, or any of the university incubators in IT campuses or medical complexes around the world, will house outposts of major universities, including the Sorbonne.³⁰

Kingdoms and brands have a mutual understanding about mythmaking. Both deploy ambitious and comprehensive use of traditional imagery, capitalizing, tabulating, and constantly refreshing the effects of irrational desire and value. Fetish and symbolic capital, no longer merely ineffable enhancements of capital, are themselves fully capitalized as commodities. In Dubai's versions of experience economies, the collapse between architectural language and logistical envelope becomes complete, and it becomes even easier to float more fantastic fictions over a revenue stream. Without introspection, experience economies instantly blend with the

²⁶ "Energy 2030 To Get Under Way Next Wednesday," Emirates News Agency (October 27, 2006).

²⁷ Marchal, 107.

²⁸ *The Independent* (July 10, 2006): 24.

²⁹ Emirates News Agency (September 7, 2006).

³⁰ *Gulf Construction* (June 26, 2006).



natural urges and talents of a dynasty. Like the Burj Al Arab’s imagery of sabers, turbans and billowing *dhow* sails, sheikhs, more than Jon Jerde or postmodern architects, come by it honestly. But in this sense, Dubai only makes a broad cartoon, a vivid indicator, of the ageless mutually sustaining partnership between power and fiction. There can be no hand-wringing over the potential power of a totemic marketplace to wipe away meaning. Indeed, Dubai may well demonstrate that there never was the possibility for such consternation. The supposedly tragic, meaningless sign of the spectacle is, in Dubai, a subtextual indicator of a willingness to be in the game. It may therefore also indicate a willingness to make bargains of all sorts, within which efflorescence and meaninglessness are instrumental political lubricants.

In many countries, innovation can occur only when there is no risk of financial instability from changes to transportation, energy policy, and public health care. Perhaps because it has chosen to sustain itself on the movement rather than retention of business, the UAE often perceives no problem in selected innovations. For instance, even though located at the epicenter of oil, the country is pursuing some of the world’s most sophisticated experiments with rail. The UAE plans to join the Arabian Railway network connecting Abu Dhabi and Dubai with a larger Gulf circuit, making it possible to travel from Dubai to Damascus and Beirut to Cairo by rail.³¹ The Emirates also has its own internal plans for a railway that would link the coast ports While this UAE railway would begin as a freight network, it would eventually service passenger travel. Dubai is also building an automated metro system, and Abu Dhabi plans to follow suit.³² The UAE also pursues alternative energy technologies. In November 2006, Abu Dhabi sponsored a global energy conference to discuss alternative energy. Hosted by the Petroleum Institute and sponsored by the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, the conference took up the issues raised by the Kyoto Protocol, citing the need to plan for energy usage after the exhaustion of current fuel sources by considering solar, hydrogen, and thermal energy.

The UAE is also partnering with African nations, and it might first seem that these partnerships could yield economic adjustments to alleviate some of the extreme suffering exacerbated by oil on that continent. Yet the UAE does not advocate the same techniques by which it shared oil wealth with its

own nationals. For instance, in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, the UAE is reaching out to offer Dubai-style real estate development instead. Almogran, 1660 acres of skyscrapers and residential properties, only underlines the extreme discrepancies between oil wealth and the exploitation of oil resources in mostly black southern Sudan. The overt, even hyperbolic expressions of oil money have been among the chief tools for instigating war and violence within non-Arab populations in the south. Most chilling is the sense that outside the UAE an ethos of using oil for nation-building and social welfare need not be deployed for non-Arab populations like those in the Sudan. Indeed, this episode would suggest that oil-related violence is somehow appropriate in a compatible form of oppression rather than war. The Middle East real estate casino has yet more material, but will it leverage assets for a diverse nation or for a kindred culture?³³

The United Arab Emirates has earned the dubious distinction of having some of the worst labor conditions in the world. Human Rights Watch has cited the country for discrimination, exploitation, and abuse. Many foreign workers, especially women, face intimidation and violence, including sexual assault, at the hands of employers, supervisors, and police and security forces, the rights group said.³⁴

It’s a funny thing about Dubai, the minute people get here they try to figure out how fast they can get out.

—Robin Moore, *Dubai*

[Through Alameen]. . . . the public can assist and communicate any

information related to security matters to law enforcement personnel. The service is considered unique in employing the latest technologies and in not requiring the presence of the caller. The information is dealt with in complete confidence, without focusing on the caller’s identity or motives; the focus is on the subject and the authenticity of the information. The service runs 24/7 in complete confidence.

As an indication of its success, Alameen in its first year received 1,178 calls, of which 107 were traffic information, 87 prostitution reports, 30 fraud, 28 illegal immigrants and workers, 20 drug, 15 begging, 12 harassment, and 7 witchcraft, 5 money laundering, in addition to various suggestions.³⁵

In September 2005, workers marched down a highway to focus attention on their mistreatment. The UAE’s Ministry of Labor estimated that 10,000 workers had organized in eighteen strikes during 2005.³⁶ In Dubai, labor problems such as nonpayment are brought before the Ministry, which in turn insists on compliance with the rules, exacting fines and administering cures at least in those situations about which it is made aware. The volume of corruption has increased with the volume of labor. Laborers, primarily from Asia, are organized in crowded labor camps, with fifty to sixty immigrants per house and six to ten workers per room.³⁷ Workers develop various coping mechanisms to achieve ten or twelve times their normal

wages at home. The labor camps that are legal and partially transparent are largely for men in jobs ranging from taxi drivers to road workers, but the domestic workers are largely women, isolated in individual homes. The volume of projects has also drawn a volume of workers that has overwhelmed the regulating agencies.³⁸

The UAE merges traditional, commercial, and civil practices to address a variety of political issues, including the labor issue. For instance, in the absence of familiar forms of citizenship or representation, workers may communicate grievances through a hotline. The country has also long relied on sheikhs or *majlis* to settle commercial or personal grievances. The majlis, or council, that one seeks from others in making decisions is an instrument that can be scaled from the home to the federation. In one sense, these practices establish a “civil process” for negotiating acknowledgement rather than simply excluding from citizenship. It may even be unanticipated reflection of the very sort of intermediate organ for which Étienne Balibar argues when he argues against evangelical assumptions about national citizenship.³⁹

The practices nevertheless establish extreme ghettos or camps, only some of which can be safely regulated. Moreover, the sense of entitlement to racial religious purity by the UAE nationals may be more extreme than that found in *entrepôts* of the fifteenth century, like Venice, where “communities of fate” were thrown together for an urbanism that did not confer citizenship except after long durations of time or as a result of selected marriage unions. Indeed, the UAE operates with something similar to the caste systems of Venice’s *nobili* and *cittadini*, except that there is no popular culture shared in urban situations.⁴⁰ The segregated camps that be sites of labor’s own entrepreneurialism, in the sense that workers are also playing currency and wage differentials. But they prevent the mixtures, masks, and camouflages that allow citizens to achieve their own *popular* sovereignty based on wits and machinations. Just as there is a hotline to report labor abuses, there is also a hotline to report suspicious activity or people for deportation. Dubai is then at once rehearsing new techniques that acknowledge labor contradictions and evading responsibility for labor’s alienation from culture.

³⁸ *Construction Week* (December 17-23, 2005): 32.

³⁹ Étienne Balibar, *We the People of Europe: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 132.

⁴⁰ Braudel, 518.

Take wisdom from the wise—not everyone who rides a horse is a jockey.

—*A verse of poetry by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum written in island masses and visible from the air in the proposed Palm Jebel Ali*⁴¹

Oh Cloud above all others!

Oh sea of generosity let nothing bring you harm

Nourishing rain that brings life to kith and kin

But denies to your adversaries

Is pure for your neighbors but not for your foes

To whom it offers but a bitter draught of woe

Fearless hand of generosity

No sacrifice we make for you can be too great

You war off all misfortunes

All dangers banished with no efforts spared

In your inscriptions in the book of glory

Every letter betokens honour.

—*Poem by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum in memory of Sheikh Zayed*

⁴¹ See <http://www.thepalm.ae/index.html>.

In some sense the UAE is an example of “new/old” or “the new oldness and the old newness,” to borrow from the activist group Retort.⁴² For Retort, the phrase describes a dyspeptic mixture of primitive power urges accessorized with sophisticated techniques of spectacle. Yet the UAE is free to be largely oblivious to modernism’s various decrees and boundaries in the twentieth century and equally unaffected by the supposed supremacy of the institutions of national stability. The country has dropped some customary cultural constants in favor of more fluid policies, allowing the country to float its financial sustenance over an even more obdurate ancient script. The UAE maintains these and other contradictions, because if they are the right ones and if there are enough of them, they become the means of sustaining their own purity. The bargain and the settlement, a larger, more diverse population of players, and the connections to rest of the world: these are the ingredients that increase the odds of success. Entrenchment and zealotry may be the very things that threaten the right to maintain an internal supremacy in family and religious tradition. The UAE has found the agility of the bargain to be ultimately more sustaining than publicly resolute entrenchment. The new/ancient is at once more resilient and stable than the Western spectacle that it absorbs.

Tutored by its world capital, the UAE will, like the pirate, engage in many different deals but always stop short of war. Its wars are fought by others. The Emirates have found a number of lubricated techniques for pirating the world that are both primitive and sophisticated. Some of those techniques override the entrenched corruption of national stances to initiate mechanisms of intergovernmental cooperation, while others intensify that corruption in outlaw environments designed to avoid global compacts. The UAE recognizes that aggression, but never violence, and keeps the money flowing. In the same way that American opposition to the Dubai port deal was more subtextual than forthright, so most politics operate through subterfuge and contradiction rather than in environments of conceptual or ethical purity. If the Emirates can maintain enough contradictions and the secrets of enough foreign powers, no one can call the bluff.

The UAE’s embrace of duplicity has rendered a global model for development that the entire world wishes to emulate. Now ma-

³¹ Global Newswire, MENA business reports (December 13, 2005).

³² *Construction Week* (December 17-23, 2005): 1.

³³ See <http://www.alsunut.com>; “Glittering Towers in a War Zone,” *The Economist* (December 7, 2006). Alsunut Development Company Ltd. is a venture of the Khartoum State, National Social Insurance the DAL Group Company Ltd.

³⁴ *Herald Tribune* (September 26, 2005).

³⁵ See http://www.dubai.ae/portal/en.portal?dae_citizen,Article_000214,1,&_nfpb=true&_pageLabel=view.

³⁶ Associated Press (November 2, 2005).

³⁷ Sulayman Khalaf and Saad Alkobaisi, “Migrants Strategies of Coping and Patterns of accommodation in the Oil-Rich Gulf Societies: Evidence from the UAE,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (1999) vol. 26 no. 2: 292.



Construction site, Dubai.

major cities and national capitals that did not have a sister city are engineering their own world city Döppelgangers on the Singapore or Dubai model. Navi Mumbai or New Songdo City outside of Seoul are perfectly designed to legally legitimize nonstate transactions. The world capital and national capital can shadow each other, alternately exhibiting a regional cultural ethos and a global ambition.

As various types of zones continue to breed, recessive or unlikely traits begin to appear. Dubai Humanitarian City or Saadiyat Island, demonstrate that the free zone can be an intentional community filled with prestigious cultural institutions, universities, or NGOs. For instance, within the bounds of Dubai Media City, there are no restrictions on free speech or free press. In these cases, the zone shifts from an organ of outlaw dealings to one

of delicate cultural sea changes — internal negotiations that may even be attempting to answer critiques about gender inequality or representation in the country at large.

All of the UAE's apparent beneficence and innovation need not be merely tools of their own public relations machine; rather, these changes demonstrate how penetrable some supposedly apolitical constructions may be and how susceptible they may be to indirect moves and ricochets that may have a political instrumentality counter to the initial stated political climate.

Social critic Mike Davis loads, aims, and fires his bracing message from the left, saying that the future of Dubai "looks like nothing so much as a nightmare of the past: Walt Disney meets Albert Speer on the shores of Araby."⁴³ Does that sentiment seem at

once constitutionally at a distance and yet strangely too close to the right's decision to label the region as a harbor of fascism? Neither left nor right politics nor the politics of resistance from within are complex enough to navigate these political waters.

Yet some backstage knowledge of the bagatelle in exchange, the players in the game, and the cards being dealt perhaps returns information to spatio-political activism. Outside of the purity of cultural scripts that we might regard to be politically authentic are rapidly mutating political scripts that may be the most immediate tools in the world's urgent situations, despite their lack of national pedigree and reference to political theology. These are the dirty tools and techniques of an extrastatecraft that might be tilted toward many different political aims.

⁴³ Mike Davis, "Dubai: Sinister Paradise," *Mother Jones* (July 14, 2005). See http://www.motherjones.com/commentary/columns/2005/07/sinister_paradise.html.

Bangkok: The Architecture of Three Ecologies

Brian McGrath

The interior piers in Wat Pathumwanaram are adorned with portraits of expert meditators.