



Arab Gulf seaport-cities. A distinctive pattern of city/sea relationship

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Because of their position on the border between the desert and the sea, the discovery of oil and, finally, the need of overcoming the so-called “dependency syndrome”, Arab Gulf seaport-cities constitute a peculiar pattern of city/sea relationship that places the meaning of city and public space in a critical position.

The article analyses the distinctive features of the model at its different stages, by highlighting the existing links between spatial and social order.

Keywords

Arab Gulf; Offshore urbanism; Segregation patterns

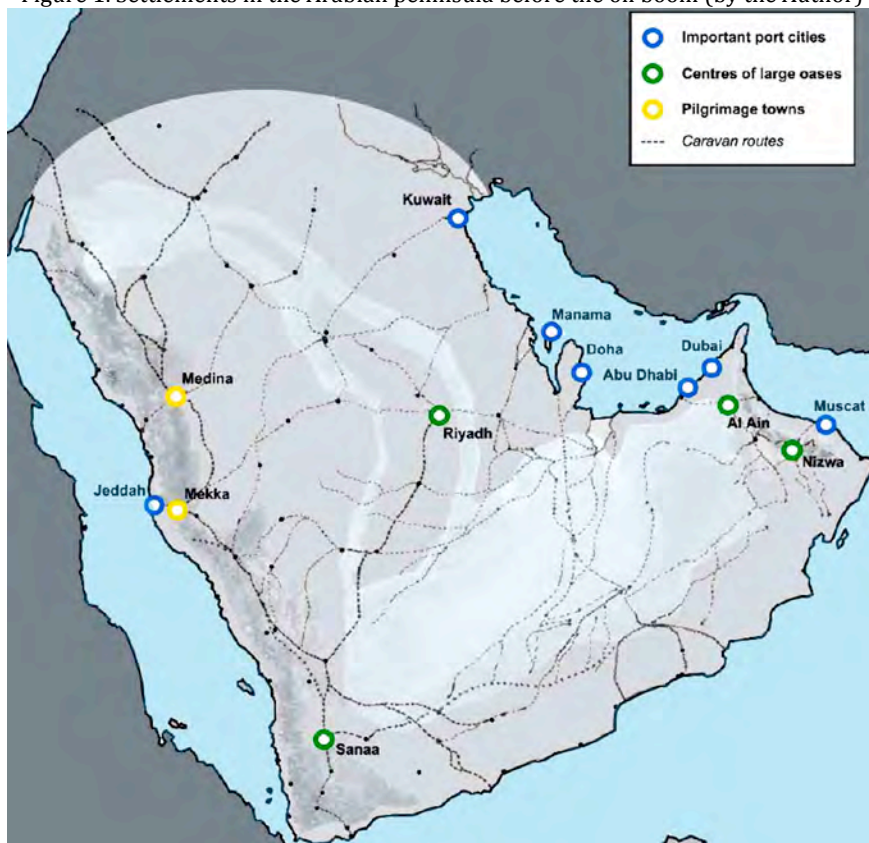
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Between desert and sea

A dichotomy of spatial modes has long existed in Arabia, a dialectic that shaped the understanding of Arabia's geography and population until the twentieth century: on the one hand, the town and its dwellers; on the other, the open desert and its nomads. Both were understood to play a crucial role: the city providing goods and products, while the nomads provided animal herds and security to trading routes. The nomadic desert Bedouin tribes, fell under the rule of the city, which acted as a stable nucleus for their peripatetic and unstable existence. The Bedouins served as the city's roving military force, and the city served as their fortress. It is worth noting that city boundaries stretch out indefinitely into the desert, overlapping with the boundaries of other cities.

As in the case of the Italo Calvino's «invisible city» of Despina (1993) – the city located on the border between the desert and the sea, which differently appears for those arriving by camel or by ship – in the Arab Gulf countries “town” meant “port-city”, located by the mid-eighteenth century in natural harbour and close to fresh water. Their social life rotated around the two dominant themes of the environment: the desert and the sea: as the meeting place of desert caravans and overseas imports, Gulf walled seaport-cities, organically constructed with meandering roads and simple mud buildings, were structured around a basic pearling, seafaring, trade, and small-industry economy, and they could grow a small industrial economy of boat construction and related works. Their existence depended on the stability of international trade by sea and by regional alliances with the nomads.

Figure 1. Settlements in the Arabian peninsula before the oil boom (by the Author)



Due to harsh geographic and environmental conditions, desert seaport towns – with population ranging between 2.000 and 15.000 inhabitants – could not sustain local agriculture and pastoral life; hence they survived by being a node in a network of exchange: pearls – one of the few items available to exchange for basic consumption necessities – and camels, horses, hides, butter and other local products coming from the desert and nearby towns were exported to Iraq, Iran, India and East Africa and, in exchange, acquired water, spices, grains, building and raw materials for local industries and other basic commodities came from overseas.

Social historians of Gulf Countries consider that the development of pearling and maritime commerce – involving the largest number of labourers who were able to earn subsistence level wages – as the two dominant activities constituting a mercantile mode of production brought about major changes in the socio-economic organization of the traditional tribal life of the settled population, since they provided the necessary basis for a rapid deployment of productive forces. This meant that, within the settled communities, the tribe ceased to exist as self-sufficient, self-perpetuating unit of production. Instead, tribal groups came to be transformed into units of occupational stratification involved in different kinds of labour. However, the tribal framework was maintained among the nomadic and semi-nomadic groups which revolved around the port-cities for exchange of some of their products. The development of the mercantile mode of production thus brought about a new articulation in which class – not tribal considerations – became the basis for the generation and distribution of the social product. Furthermore, the success of these commercial ventures meant an increasing reliance on larger ships with their corresponding larger crews, leading to a proletarianization of labour.

Ships, which represented the major means of production in the two dominant activities of pearling and seafaring trade, were owned by the social class called *al-tujjar* (“the merchant”). Because of their ownership and/or control of the means of production, the merchants enjoyed a position of wealth and social power (Al Falah, 1983). On the other hand, pearl divers (“*al-ghasa*”) and seamen represented in terms of population size, the largest social class, living in wretched conditions of a proletariat class existing in an archaic politico-economic system, in which the harsh nature of work was not confined to the work process itself but permeated throughout the fabric of social relations which it has generated over time.

In between these two social classes existed fragments of other social groups whose members were engaged in subsistence-oriented activities: oasis farmers, most of whom worked on land owned by Sheikhly or wealthy families (even if some of them owned their own small plots of cultivated land); boat builders, who sold their traditional skills to merchants who dominated the sea-oriented economy; Bedouin pastoralists; some craftsmen engaged in simple local manufacturing; and fishermen, all owning their own simple means of production. In addition, there was a middle position including shopkeepers, religious men who taught in Quranic schools, government clerks, sentry men, personal guards of the ruling sheikhs, and so on.

Spatially, they were divided into neighbourhoods/districts, which gave the people a sense of micro-identity within the whole. These spatial units transcended the old tribal tradition of bloodline divisions, though people from similar backgrounds and ancestries tended to share a neighbourhood.

Dependency and the image of an unlimited good

The magnitude of changes in Arab Gulf Countries due to the discovery of oil – which occurred in the various Gulf countries in different decades and coincided with their independency from the Ottoman empire (Tab. 1, Fig. 2) – as well as its export on a commercial scale has been so great that local scholars describe their modern history in terms of two periods: pre-oil and post-oil. It is worth noting that no other region of the

world is so rich in oil as the Gulf as about 50% of all currently known oil resources are located there. In addition, processing this oil is simple and fast because the deposits are close to the earth's surface.

Figure 2. Oil-cities and oil fields (by the Author)



The oil revolution – «from rags to riches» (Al-Fahirn, 1996) – generated within a very short time-period broad transformations in the traditional social fabric of Arab Gulf societies. In a few decades new wealth transformed the relatively isolated, poor, mud-walled sea-ports into glittering commercial capitals, linked to the large cosmopolitan cities of the industrial capitalist world. In fact, by the early 1970s the oil states in the Arab Gulf came to enjoy tremendous wealth, manifested not only in the accumulation of huge capitals surpluses but also very high incomes enjoyed by the citizens. Especially during the decade of the 1970s – when oil prices began sky-rocketing to unpredicted levels, triggered by the oil embargo imposed during the Arab-Israeli War in October 1973 – local people began to perceive of good as unlimited and came to consider that the oil revenues were going to flow in for ever as a God's gift (Khalaf, 1992).

Immense oil wealth suddenly gave the local inhabitants new powers: power to acquire the latest technology which took the industrial West more than two century to develop, power to buy villas and houses far away the green pastures of Europe and the Mediterranean, and power to enjoy an affluent consumer life, perhaps unmatched anywhere else in the world.

It was not easy for the traditional socio-economic organization, with its base in subsistence economy, to shift rapidly towards an entirely new economic system based on the complex capital structure of the industrialized West. However, the socio-economic order of the oil boom adversely affected the traditional occupations, pearl diving, fishing, small scale agriculture and sea-trading: within a very short time all this structure elapsed into history (at least, sometimes they were reconstructed as folklore in national celebrations).

A process of industrialisation began in the Gulf states, and it was initially limited to representative and generally oversized projects, mainly focusing on the development of the capital cities, leading to an acceleration of urbanisation due to migration from rural

areas. In addition to aluminium and copper converting industries, numerous dry docks and petrochemical plants were constructed. Major infrastructure projects – such as streets, energy plants, desalination plants, airports and harbours – were the focus of public investment, which then became more directed toward establishing industries in order to decrease the need for the import of basic commodities such as food, furniture and building materials. Finally, the industrial production of other, non-essential consumer goods followed as the last stage in the development of what was a relatively short industrial revolution in the Gulf, taking place over no more than three or four decades.

Table 1. Settlements in the Arabian peninsula before the oil boom (by the Author)

GOVERNMENT TYPE	OIL DISCOVERY	POPULATION	OIL PRODUCTION
BAHRAIN – Semi-constitutional monarchy (but very limited citizens participation).	1933 (relatively small oil fields).	From 61,726 (1965) to 148,000 (1995) .	From 75,000 bbl/d in the 70s to the current 35,000 bbl/d (less than a half).
KUWAIT – Semi-constitutional monarchy (but very limited citizens participation). Independence in 1961 .	1946 (large oil fields)	From about 100,000 (1950) to almost 2 million (2000) , annual growth reaching 18% . Vast demolitions/rebuilding (satellite-cities) in 1961-80 in the capital city: from 96,860 to 60,365 (overall population: 1,358,000). Emigration due to the Gulf War (1990): about 500,000 .	Oil peak predicted for 2013 .
QATAR – More or less absolute monarchy Independency in 1971 .	1949 (also the world's largest producer of liquefied natural gas).	In Doha : from just a few thousand inhabitants in the mid-20th century to over 340,000 in the late 90s .	780,000 bbl/d (2004) . Expected: 270,000 bbl/d (2020) . Liquefied natural gas: 1,4 Mbbbl/d (2011) .
UAE – Independence in 1971 . Semi-constitutional monarchy (but very limited citizens participation).	1962 (large oil fields, especially in Abu Dhabi)	In Dubai : from about 183,187 (1975) to 826,387 (2000) .	Abu Dhabi – possible increase: up to 1,8 Mbbbl/d . Peak expected: 2026 . Dubai (the second largest oil producer of the UAE) – since the 90s : from 230,000 to 170,000 bbl/d . Reserves expected to be exhausted within the next 20 years .

MAIN SOURCES:

- http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/special_edds/20060710/
<http://www.indexmundi.com/energy.aspx?country=om&product=oil&graph=production+consumption>
<http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Bahrain/Oil.html>
<http://www.theoil Drum.com/story/2006/10/5/215316/408>
http://www.uaeinteract.com/uaeint_misc/pdf/perspectives/11.pdf
<http://www.theoil Drum.com/story/2006/10/5/215316/408>
HECK, G., WÖBCKE, M. (2005) *Arabische Halbinsel*, Ostfildern: DuMont Reiseverlag, 5, Auflage.
REICHERT, H. (1978) *Die Verstädterung der Eastern Provinz von Saudi Arabien*, Dissertation am Institut für Städtebau, Universität Stuttgart.
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By the mid-1980s these transformations constituted the emergence of a new societal type – labelled by local scholars (Khalaf & Hammoud, 1987) as *al-mujtama't al-naftiyarn* («oil societies») – that differs in its sociological characteristics, structural form and ideological outlook from both the advanced capitalist societies and the type that Shils (1963) and Geertz (1963) identified as the emerging Third World states. It also differs from the other oil-producing societies – such as Iran, Iraq, Algeria, Nigeria, and Venezuela – in standards of wealth, income per capita, population size, and particular developmental needs such as reliance on massive imported expatriate labour.

Beyond sharing a similar climate and ecology, common history, language, demographic features, religion and culture, such «oil societies» found themselves recently possessing

huge oil reserves allowing great prosperity, which, in turn, has generated similar transformations, development and challenges as well as a similar integration of these countries within the world economic order and its transnational global culture.

The newly emerged complex system and inflow of surplus capital not only modernized the commercial sector of the region, but also introduced the merchant capitalist structure in the entire Gulf region (Ansari & Qutub, 1983), by transforming the old *al-tujjar* into agents for large multinational companies selling modern commodities and luxury goods for the new lifestyle of high consumerism based on one of the highest level of imported goods in the world. Economic life in these oil societies became almost entirely dependent on oil revenues, so that we may refer to as «the oil mode of production» (Khalaf & Hammoud, 1987) which began shaping in an accelerated form all aspects of social life.

During the initial phases the process of extracting oil occurred in isolated enclaves, owned and managed by oil companies of the colonial West. But then, through their leadership on the government executive apparatus, the ruling family of sheikhs found themselves in direct control of the flow of oil wealth. This aided them to be free from their reliance on wealthy merchant families – owning ships, namely the major means of production in the pre-oil era – and traditional allegiances with tribe outside the mud walls of the old towns.

Thus, in the new oil mode, wealth is not generated by productive social forces from within the society itself, but it is distributed to the population by a new and continually expanding state bureaucratic apparatus of the so-called «bedocrats» (Al-Rumaihi, 1983). In fact, the role of the new “oil state” (*dawlat al-naft*) has expanded far beyond its traditional boundaries in terms of ownership of the means of productions (Ismael, 1982) (obviously oil, but also commercial, industrial and financial companies, not to mention land, a very important domain for investment and speculation activities) as well as of interference in all areas of life to extent almost paradoxically approaching the socialist state.

An example is given by the distinctive industrialization pattern. In fact, since its beginning, industry was mainly based, directly or indirectly, on the oil and gas production: since almost all the other elements – labour, raw materials and licences – needed by industry had to be imported, consequently, it often relied on public subsidies, which again derived mainly from oil exports.

Being the state a paternalistic, all omnipotent, all-providing father “distributor” of oil wealth (in the form public works geared towards building infrastructure for modernizing society and granting lavish welfare provisions and services largely exceeding those of Western countries), within such an asymmetrical power structure individuals can be intended – rather than citizens – as parasitic «recipients» and «charity seekers» that «work little and produce nothing» (Al-Falah, 1983). As a result, on the background of the emerging of what Nagi (1986) terms as a «dependency syndrome», social bonds started to crumble as there were no ties to bind individuals with each other or with their neighbours. In fact, as a further effect of the oil boom, the rapid transformation from a predominantly agricultural region to oil exporting national states meant that the indigenous population could not acquire at a similar pace the necessary skills for the modernization of a super wealthy society, and this resulted in the importation of foreign professional, skilled and unskilled labour (Ibrahim, 1982) by keeping the region among the major destination in the global migration map (Castles & Miller, 1998; Nayyar, 2002; Castree et al., 2004) and leading to the consequence that indigenous population became the minority (even if in a very privileged position) in their own country (Tab.2).

At the beginning of the oil boom guest workers came primarily from neighbouring Arab countries, being them particularly welcomed because of their linguistic, cultural and religious compatibility with the local population. Then, the Gulf authorities became worried about their bringing and spreading radical social and political concepts, such as the secular pro-Soviet ideologies or the leftist pan-Arab ideas, calling for the abolition of monarchies or regarding borders in the region as artificial lines imposed by Western imperialists, threatening the internal stability. Thus, over the following decades, Asian workers were preferred to Arabs (Tab. 3) because of their being less expensive to employ,

easier to lay-off, believed to be more efficient, obedient and manageable (Ghobash, 1986), and – very important – because they were used to leaving their families at home, without any hope of permanently settling. Consequently, millions of South and South-East Asian workers immigrated to the Gulf on the basis of short-term working contracts. In addition to lower-paid labour, many Europeans, Americans and Australians immigrated to the Gulf to work as businessmen or consultants.

Table 2. Foreign workers in Gulf countries (by the Author)

	NATIONALS 2004	%	EXPATRIATES 2004	%	TOTAL 2004	% FOREIGN WORKFORCE
BAHRAIN	438,209	62.0	268,951	38.0	707,160	above 65.0
KUWAIT	943,000	35.6	1,707,000	64.4	2,650,000	82.0
QATAR	223,209	30.0	520,820	70.0	744,029	almost 90.0
UEA	722,000	19.0	3,278,000	81.0	4,000,000	90.0

Table 3. Major expatriate communities in Gulf countries (in thousands) (by the Author)

NATIONALITIES	BAHRAIN	KUWAIT	QATAR	UAE	MAIN SOURCES
	2004	2003	2002	2002	
Indians	120	320	100	1,200	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KAPISZEWSKI, A.(2005) Non-indigenous citizens and ‘stateless’ residents in the Gulf monarchies, <i>Krakowskie Studia Miedzynarodowe</i>, 2 (VI). • AMBROSETTI, E., TATTOLO, G. (2004) <i>Petrole et migrations de travail vers les Pays du Golfe</i>, paper presented at 13e colloque de l’AIDELF, Budapest (20-24 September). • KAPISZEWSKI, A. (2004) Arab labour migration to the GCC States, in: <i>Arab Migration in a Globalized World</i>, Geneva: International Organization for Migration.
Pakistans	50	100	100	450	
Egyptians	30	260	35	140	
Bangladeshis		170		100	
Filipinos	25	70	50	120	
Sudanese				30	
Sri Lankans		170	35	160	
Jordanians/Palestinians	20	50	50	110	
Indonesians		9			
Syrians		100			
Iranians	30	80	60	40	
Nepalese			70		
Bidun		80			

Petro-urbanism: the distinctive oil-city type

The spatial expression of the oil society consists of a distinctive city type – the «oil-city» (Khalaf, 2006) or «petro-urbanism» (Riad, 1981) – that must be viewed within the context of the peculiar dynamics of the oil economy within globalization processes. In fact, even if such cities are built around the oil industry, they cannot be classified as “industrial”, being difficult to make comparisons with the urbanization process of other developing countries, where urbanization was slow and associated with different phases of a gradual industrialization.

Speedy evolution and distorted demographic composition and functions are combined here with coastal location and related sea activities in newly constructed harbours (and consequent wider cultural tolerance with respect to other conservative Islamic cities) as well as with the role of capital cities, main economic and population centres and seats of power for the dynastic ruling families. The latter control the state, distribute oil wealth and directly own the surrounding *tabula rasa* of the open desert, also having political stability and strong inward flows of capital investment, and neither legacy of industrial dereliction, nor sprawl of spontaneous settlements, so that – according to the nationals’ strong preference for fully detached villas (and consequent migration from the old city centre towards the outskirts) – plans for low-density horizontal expansion, not proportionately mirroring the population size, can be favoured.

When the process of oil urbanisation first began, the traditional oasis towns started to grow beyond their former clear borders: urban walls were demolished as no longer needed as protection, thus the first consequence of the modern urbanisation was the loss of the compact form of the previous oasis settlements, with one of the lowest densities in the world. In fact, the oil city can be divided into three major areas: the old city core, the

new CBD and the suburbs in the outskirts, which are the biggest part of the urban area, and are typically structured within a system of streets and highways arranged in a strong geometrical grid and square building lots.

In fact, even if modernization was not "superimposed" on these countries (rather, it was adopted or imported), since they did not know a colonial period (except in the case of Bahrain), a distinctive feature of oil city type consists of the fact that such cities were not built in contrast to the old towns; rather, they were imposed upon them, which were destroyed, along with their mode of production and way of life.

Also the distinctive relationships between city and sea, featuring the traditional sea-port cities, disappeared with the advent of the oil-boom. In this sense, we may say that the symbolic aim of the re-constructed pre-oil relationships between the city and the old sea economic activities, which are performed during the annual celebrations of the National Independence Day in Kuwait (the so-called *yum al-bahhar al-Kuwaiti*, "the Kuwaiti seaman's day") as well as the *yum al-badiya* ("the desert day"), and the *ihya thikra al-ghous* ("commemoration of pearl diving") – «state-supported annual production of nostalgia» (Khalaf, 1992) – is to intensify the perception of the reality of the unlimited good, so different from the *ayyam al-faqr* ("times of poverty").

According to Pacione (2005), in marked contrast with older industrial cities of both the West and former Communist cities seeking to effect urban regeneration, oil Gulf sea-port cities were engaged primarily in a process of urban generation. In this sense, the oil city as a whole can be seen as almost the exact antithesis to the old one (and, similarly, the villa to the traditional courtyard house): while the old city type is among the most ecological cities in the world due to its sensitive adjustment to the desert environment, the oil city type is among the most un-ecological in the world, involving one of the highest rates of energy consumption per person.

As a consequence of both oil abundance and low-density suburban development, further peculiar characteristics of the oil city type are the widespread dissemination of communication and transportation technologies – even if public transportation remain underdeveloped and it is associated to low-status, low-paid Asian workers (Khalaf, 2006) – and the almost total reliance on the private car as the primary transport, leading to wide streets and a system of highways and ring-roads, and to the disappearance of the traditional system of main roads and labyrinthine side-streets that constituted the densely built housing areas with their traditional courtyard houses. In this sense, oil cities lack the concept of *al-shari* ("the street"), the pulsating pedestrian street life, which is typical of the other Muslim cities.

But developing urban centres by creating pedestrian zones has not been part of petro-urbanism mainly because of the dominance of shopping malls, which widely took over the role of public centres, by revealing the way in which such cities primarily are «centres of consumption rather than centres of production» (Abu-Lughod, 1983), ranking among the world's top in per capita retail mall spaces. The latter consist of large, ultra modern, air-conditioned and multi-stored "heavens" (especially during the hot and humid half of the year), with the latest technological innovation, shining marble floors, elevators, water fountains, Mediterranean style cafés, international restaurants, soft music, and low-paid Asian workers. Such "heavens" – which are at the origin of the highest household waste in the world – «focus the dream images of the global economy and help to produce global subjectivities by shaping everyday people's imagination and discourse about globalization» (Kanna, 2003).

Finally, a further distinctive feature of the oil city type – perhaps the most relevant – consists of its peculiar segregation spatial pattern that has been often compared to a *de facto* caste system (Dresch & Piscatori, 2005) and that is based – rather than on religion or ethnicity and tribal factors – on the relationship among nationality, property and income (Tab. 4-5), which, in turn, is to be connected to the generous social «wealthfare» (Nagi, 1986) and, consequently, to the broader "dependency syndrome" due to financial surplus given by the oil production.

In fact, beyond enjoying a large variety of public services and amenities, only nationals (*al-muwateneen*) – ideologically oscillating between traditionalism and modernity, being their newly acquired consumerism coupled with the defence of their identity (and privileges) – are allowed to own land or houses as well as they are entitled to land and building grants, which provide a plot of land and an interest-free loan (*ard wa qardh*) to finance the construction of a “villa” (Nagy, 1998) responding to their need of privacy.

Table 4. Nationals’ settlement pattern (by the Author)

INCOME	“WEALTHFARE”	HOUSE TYPE	SETTLEMENT PATTERN
HIGH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> education health social security provision and allowances for the family, youth, the aged and the handicapped sport facilities the right of employment in a government institution generous retirement benefits 	unattached, 2-storey “villa”-style homes, with 5 to 7 bedrooms, 3 to 5 bathrooms, swimming pools, 2-car garage, into walled 30 sm. owned property	<p>in low density areas outside the congested city centre, with street layouts reinforcing the closed feel of the neighbourhood:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> primary roads: commercial services narrower secondary roads: community services (mosques and playgrounds) narrowest tertiary roads: entirely lined by houses, which are thus turned inwards towards the neighbourhood rather than towards the city, by providing a closed, relatively private street space
LOW (recently settled and socio-politically conservative Bedu families)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> loans for marriage, housing construction and renovation free local telephone service, heavily subsidized food, electricity and water. 	<i>al-bait al-sha-bi</i> (“people’s house”) freely provided by the state, generally putting up 50 to 80 families, with repetitive uniformity in architectural design and large courtyards with palm trees, within <i>sha’beyat</i> (“people’s communities”) where traditional social bonds can be maintained.	built in the early 1970s and 1980s in the periphery of the city and currently engulfed by the new expanding low-density suburbs.

Table 5. Foreign workers’ settlement pattern (by the Author)

INCOME	“WEALTHFARE”	HOUSE TYPE	SETTLEMENT PATTERN
HIGH (Northern American/European skilled professionals)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> status of perpetual visitors no retirement benefits not entitled to own land or houses cannot own business without a local partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> spacious deluxe apartment buildings and towers designed to evoke images of Manhattan or other large US cities and provided with swimming pools, recreation rooms, party halls, parking, mini-markets, and laundry services secured gated communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in the Central Business District in low-density suburbs
MEDIUM (Arab schoolteachers, medical technicians, nurses, clerks, surveyors, foremen, policemen, accountants)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> no job security no subsidized housing cannot practice certain professions (such as law) or run for public office 	modern low-quality uniformly repetitive buildings, reminiscent of the apartment buildings in former communist Eastern Europe	built in the early 1970s and 1980s in the periphery of the city and currently engulfed by the new expanding low-density suburbs
LOW unskilled Asian single males (construction or oil industry, retail services) or single women (domestic servants, retail services)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> required by law to have a local citizen as <i>kafeel</i> (“sponsor”), with the risk of potential exploitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> employer-provided housing or rent homes within the employer’s home “labour camps” and dormitories near their place of employment low-cost rented houses often shared with other workers apartment buildings or older homes converted into shared units 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in the industrial areas on the outer edge of the city (labour camps and dormitories) in the congested old city centre, in residual neighbourhoods that are viewed by nationals as unpleasant and unwanted problems that distort the image of the new city

Instead, expatriates and foreign workers (*al-wafedeen*, “the in-comers”) – occupying the status of perpetual visitors, since formal procedure for naturalisation are very difficult – do not enjoy the “wealthfare” system and depend on their *kafeel* (“sponsor”), an emerging social type not only embodying legal privileges but also enjoying social and economic power that leads expatriates to a potential exploitation (Khalaf, 1992), since the sponsor holds the employee’s passport and structures many aspects of their employees’ lives, such as providing housing, clothing, meals and, in extreme cases, deciding how the employees spend their days off (Longva, 1997).

Heterotopias and hyper-reality: the emerging post oil island-city type

The impending end of the oil and natural gas reserves (Tab. 1) is at the origin of the current shift of the Gulf countries’ development strategies and of the attempt to diversify their highly dependent economies towards the activity sectors that are typical of a world city: beyond investing in “physical” sectors traditionally related to trade, such as harbours and international airports, in order to create new global trading hubs, the diversification process also involves “immaterial” sectors, such as (off-shore) banking, ITC, media (think of the rising role of the broadcasting channel Al Jazeera in Qatar), high-level education (think of the Education City in Doha), culture (think of the Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi and the opera house in Dubai), leisure and entertainment (think of events such as Formula 1 in Bahrain and the Asian Games in Doha), and international tourism.

Figure 3. Land uses in Dubai in 2030 (re-elaboration by the Author)



The emirate of Dubai in particular has been developing since the 90s into an international tourist destination, offering high-class hotels, beaches and shopping possibilities and growing from about 3 million visitors in 2000 to over 7 million in 2007.

Figure 4. High-rise building in Dubai (photo by the Author)



Two main connected instruments are used. First, the establishment of Free Trade Zones (FTZ), positioned at airports or harbours, with few taxes, very minor bureaucratic requirements and limited (if any) labour legislation. The first FTZ was experimented in 1985 in Jebel Ali (Dubai); then, the model spread in Kuwait, Bahrain, and particularly in the UAE. Dubai Media City – where CNN and BBC have presence – is the first media FTZ in the world.

Figure 5. Urban typologies in Dubai 2030 (re-elaboration by the Author)



Second, the legal introduction of freehold ownership of residential and other type of properties in Dubai – automatically giving residency status, however only on a rolling 3-years basis rather than for life – in specially designated zones, given by the Law No. 7/2006, following a first announcement in 2002. The instant effect of this fundamental market opening was a strong shift in demand from a variety of investors with different motivations: long-term residents who had been renting, new residents coming to work in Dubai, and overseas investors, attracted by the stable economy (and by low taxes) and favoured by the credit boom, seeking attractive investments (or using real estate assets to recycle grey or illegal funds). However, the central decision making remains in the hands of the ruling family, who has started to govern Dubai more and more as a corporate manager in addition to its genuine political function. This has particularly affected the development of real estate with the creation of private corporations initiated by the Amir himself in order to develop freehold properties on a large scale.

Figure 6. Future Dubai (http://www.clifton-dubai.com/334-Jumeirah_Village.htm)



These two factors have had relevant effects on the urban environment, leading to the emerging of a city type as distinctive as the previous oil city had been. In fact, such post-oil city type cannot be merely framed within the (generic) category of “world cities” or, at least, of world cities «wannabees» (Taylor, 2004), even if – despite their specialization, with banking concentrated in Bahrain, services and tourism (including medical tourism for plastic surgery) in Dubai, and education in Qatar – all Gulf cities are organizing nodes of global networks, being the headquarters of global capitalism and centres of business, advanced producer services, trade and banking that can be arranged hierarchically on the basis of the levels of global investment and economic power they have attracted (Friedmann, 1995; Sassen, 1991).

Figure 7. Hydro-suburbia in the desert, Dubai (photo by the Author)



Town marketing, strictly connected to media and tourism industry, has begun to play a crucial role, leading to both a new role for cities and a new form of urbanism, which rotates around a peculiar idea of “iconic development”, based on an accentuated concept of “urban brand”, which is helped by the involvement of celebrated architects – such as Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Tadao Ando and Jean Nouvel – as well as by the use of sensationalistic superlatives: “the largest man-made islands in the world”; “the 7 stars Burj Al-Arab hotel”; “the tallest building on earth”; “Burj Dubai, the most elegant one kilometre ever built”; “Masdar City, the world’s first zero-carbon, zero-waste, car-free city”, and so on.

Figure 8. The 7 stars Burj Al-Arab hotel (photo by the Author)



Since air-conditioned liberates contemporary architectural forms, giving rise to a set of formal possibilities (Katodrytis, 2006) that were unthinkable before, architectural programs – with building conceived as consumable, replaceable, disposable and short-lived “mind-zone spaces” – are becoming fused and undifferentiated, so that there is little difference between holiday accommodation and housing as well as between the notion of centre and periphery, and city tends to be everywhere and nowhere. As well as Foucault’s heterotopias (1986), such ephemeral urban spaces «invert, contest or represent real places» and appear as «capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces that are themselves incompatible, a sort of microcosm».

Thus, the peculiar fragmented and collaged urban pattern resulting of such a hybrid model based on a still stringent state social control, economic liberalism and unrestrained urban development makes the Gulf sea-port cities a laboratory for a kind of urbanism that places the very notion of city and public space in a critical position, since its nature – so addicted to the promise of the new and the surprising wonderful – tends to create appetites rather than solving problems.

Not surprisingly, the concept of “island” appears as a crucial key in the understanding of contemporary urbanity of Gulf sea-port cities: not only the artificial islands and a seascape in which it may soon be difficult to differentiate between the natural and the constructed; neither the thematic Free Trade Zones, nor the pre-existent pattern in which the various national and ethnic groups (national, Arabs, Asian and Europeans) live in largely separate residential neighbourhoods and do not interact socially and culturally (Nagi, 2006), but also the walled labour camps on the border of the desert that are not part of the official city even if the people who live there – Pakistani, Indians, Bangladeshi – have built it and its offshore heterotopias. At the same time, the man-made islands follow the characteristics of gated communities – enclosures, isolation, and surveillance – and, in a certain sense, construct the lifestyle of their inhabitants: tenants that are also guests. This clearly reveals the way in which the concept of island may be really seen as a social program inscribed in the space, a sort of urban *lapsus linguae*.

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