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CRP 5850: Reflection Essay 2

Spatial Fixes, Symbolic Power, and Hyperreality in the United Arab Emirates

The history of urbanization in the United Arab Emirates defies most conventional narratives of urban growth in the Global South largely due to its unique political history, geography, and economy. A loose collection of Arab clans formally united in 1971, the decentralized union consists of highly stratified and hierarchal city-state settlements. Population has grown from less than one million on the UAE's formation to 9.3 million in 2016, with almost 8 million settled in urban areas (Peterson and Crystal, 2017). Though oil was first discovered in Abu Dhabi in 1958 and in Dubai in 1969, the massive growth in the UAE's population and economy happened largely in the twenty-first century (see Fig. 1). These demographic changes separate the UAE from other nations that have seen dramatic growth since the beginning of the global economic restructuring of the 1980s onwards and suggest a unique trajectory of urbanism within its major cities.

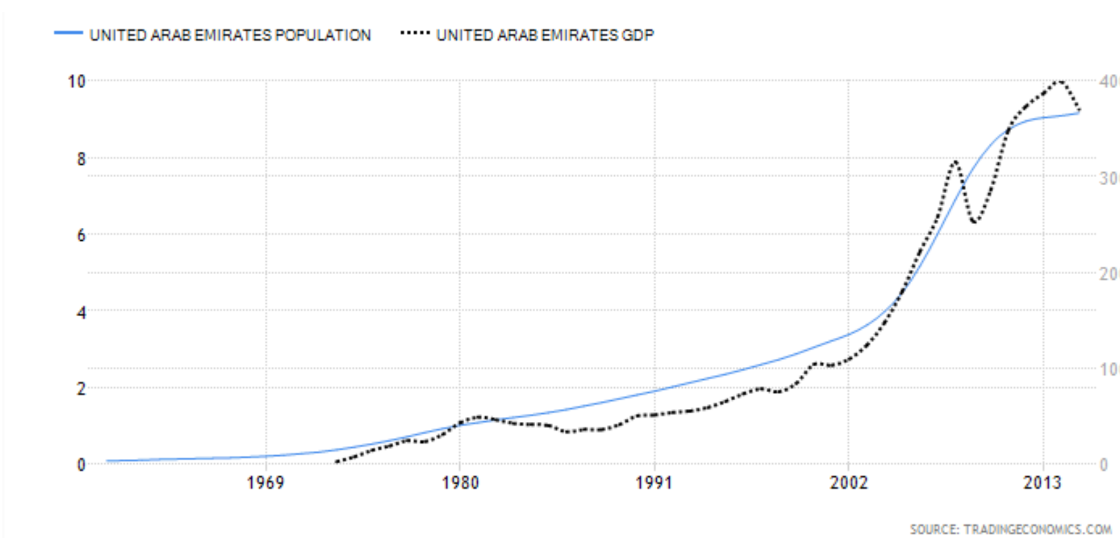

Figure 1. Population and GDP from 1960 to 2017; note the steep increase in both metrics from 2000 to 2010 (Source: Trading Economics, 2017).

In the mania left in the wake of globalization's rapidly accelerating capital flows, real estate becomes a dominant method of stabilizing physical value from these digital fluxes. Harvey (2001) describes this in his theory of "spatial fixes", in which capital must set space as immovable infrastructure nodes in order to facilitate space-less hypermobile networks of capital and communication. Lefebvre (2003) adds to this, noting that as industrial production and its infrastructures slows, "real-estate speculation becomes the principal source for the formation of capital, that is, the realization of surplus value." By fixing capital in physical infrastructure, the perpetuation of the creation and destruction of real estate becomes a primary product of global capitalism.

The urban centers of the UAE fill a particular role in this spatial fixing that matches their unique development among Global South cities. As Peak Oil grew into an increasingly visceral prophecy through the latter-half of the twentieth century, Dubai and Abu Dhabi became sites for the fixing of excess profits from global oil dependency, first starting in the 1970s with investments from Iranian elite exiles and much more dramatically over the past decade by the Saudis, Kuwait, and Qatar (Davis, 2006). This investment is inherently speculative, drawn from increasing anxieties over oil supplies as terrorism and war ravage once stable suppliers like Iraq and Libya. The UAE's push to switch its domestic consumption of energy to natural gas and renewable sources is undoubtedly in part an understanding of the instabilities of its primary export's markets (Peterson and Crystal, 2017).

The UAE serving as a primary site for this investment is due to both its political stability and its generous free market development landscape. As a collection of clans, there is a long history of political consolidation and authoritarian rule amongst the UAE's city-states. Additionally, the grand majority of expats and foreign workers who have contributed to the meteoric rise in population lack basic rights of citizenship, with only one-fifth of the country's residents being citizens (Peterson and Crystal, 2017). Though the Arab Spring spurred the UAE to establish some basic democratic processes, the nation's first-ever election in 2006 had an electoral college of approximately 7,000 people who voted to select only half of the advisory Federal National Council. Further, the government provides free hospital services and schooling to nationals and is a primary provider of housing. These political stabilizers are matched with expansive land availability, few development restrictions, cheap labor, and a responsive and expeditious bureaucracy to make the UAE a prime site for the fixing of capital (Davis, 2006).

It is through these political and economic conditions that the urban centers of Dubai and Abu Dhabi acquire their unique architectural forms. Acuto (2010) describes Dubai's landscape as a manifestation of symbolic power, in which the built form mediates social interactions via patterns of inclusion and exclusion. The Emirati see their economic prospects as global centers of commerce as tied to not only political stability and economic freedom but also architectural symbolism. In the vacuum of historical urbanism, the UAE prioritizes modernity as the preferred signal of their economic dominance. This is achieved through the creation of iconic built forms and the proliferation of a manufactured national branding of luxury.

The architectural agenda of the UAE can be summed up by Acuto's 2009 conversation with a Dubai Municipality Senior Official, who stated: "Dubai does not reinvent, it does better and bigger." The role of iconic architecture, that vaguely understood and even more vaguely calculable typology of built form virally consumed and immensely powerful, is paramount in the UAE, which utilizes its capacity for high-capital projects to try endlessly to establish global landmarks. The Burj Khalifa, Burj al Arab, and Yas Island, as well as failed projects like The World islands and OMA-designed Waterfront City plan (see Fig. 2), illustrate the Emirati's strategy of making the biggest "anything" and hoping it sticks. These imaginations are coordinated with the extensive restricting and segregating of underclass workers into quarters invisible to the eyes of tourists and global investors.

Figure 2. OMA's never-realized Waterfront City masterplan, featuring "a gigantic 44-storey Sphere" acting as "an extreme iconic counterpoint to the generic constructions encouraged elsewhere on the island" (Source: OMA, 2008).

In addition to iconicity, the UAE's visual signaling of modernity comes through its ubiquitous branding of its urban centers with luxury. This is in itself through the association with luxury brands and the cooption of the their respective designs. Explicit examples of this branding via brands include the selection of Armani as the operator of the Burj Khalifa's hotel, the use of Bugatti Veyron supercars in the Dubai Police fleet, the Ferrari World theme park with its extensive use of rosso corsa, and the Gates Tower in Abu Dhabi built in the literal image of Singapore's Marina Bay Sands (see Fig. 3). By engaging with the design identities of luxury brands, the built form of the UAE creates an experiential luxury that manifests in a hyperreality of icons and symbols designed to project eminence and receive respect as a modern state.

Figure 3. The Gate Towers on Al Reem Island in Abu Dhabi; heavily-inspired by the Marina Bay Sands in Singapore, the Gate Towers replaces the Sands's signature rooftop pool with a set of duplex apartments (Source: Fisher, 2014).

Through the prioritization of architecture iconicity and deliberate brand association, the projection of symbolic power onto the built environment, and the priming of political and economic systems for development, the UAE creates the conditions for massive foreign investment in the form of spatial fixes. The state manages to be notably stable via its monopoly over the anxieties of Peak Oil and yet distinctly vulnerable due to its reliance on the most volatile fringes of the real estate market. In these ways, Dubai and Abu Dhabi reflect not the standard narrative of the Global South metropolis but a unique urbanism unlikely replicable anywhere else.

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