

Log

SUMMER 2006

Toward a critique of
sustainable architecture
and landscape

IN AUTOMOBILES – ALMOST EVERYWHERE

Imagine the business savvy of Julius Sämann when he invented the pine-tree shaped air freshener “Little Trees” for the automobile in 1951. A Swiss-born Canadian, Sämann established Car-Freshner Corporation in Watertown, New York, in 1952; the company diversified in the 1960s with foreign subsidiaries, including *Arbre Magique*® – magic tree. Given that today there are approximately 243,023,485 registered vehicles in the United States alone, whole forests, literally, may be hanging from the mirrors of autos on US roads. Little Trees are “the most recognized and popular automotive air freshener brand in the world,” the company states. The six “natural” scents, including pine, peppermint, and lavender, constitute only 51 percent of the product line sold; other scents range from “sport” to green tea, passion fruit, and the newly introduced “brilliant musk” and “sparkling ocean.” Each of the firm’s 21 unique fragrances can keep the car freshly scented for two months before the powerful odor of reality sets in.

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cottage, Le Hameau. The genius loci, the genius of the place, is always multiple and in a state of metamorphosis.

We must never forget the inexorable, if dissimulated, quotient of anguish underlying the pleasure principle that guides the use of gardens. I now understand that what I have termed the Pascalian garden is not the antithesis of the Cartesian garden, but its obverse, hidden side. It is another term for the effects of the inexorable flow of time, and the marvelous work of the imagination.

COROLLARIES ABOUT THE CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION OF "FORMAL" GARDENS

1. Symbols are as important as images to guide restoration.
2. The garden must constantly be reinvented as a site for contemporary exhibitions.
3. Conservation must be informed by the pleasure principle.
4. All the arts should find an appropriate place in the garden.
5. The "formal" garden must remain open to the "informality" of the natural world.
6. Complexity and contradiction should not be avoided.
7. Tales, narratives, form an integral part of a garden, and should be featured.
8. The formal garden should bear vestiges of its sedimented history.
9. All aesthetic value has a use value, which must be respected.
10. Traces of time and history must be maintained.

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Marc Angéil and Cary Siress

Dubai, Inc.



HELIPAD OF THE BURJ AL ARAB, USED FOR A TENNIS MEDIA EVENT ADVERTISING THE DUBAI DUTY FREE MEN'S OPEN, JANUARY 2005.

Imperialism is applied planimetry.

– Peter Sloterdijk¹

The scene requires a script: what the media presents as a loose, improvised happening demands well-oiled coordination – the lawn must be ordered, the press campaign prepared, the cameras installed, the celebrities invited, and the necessary security measures taken. At last, Roger Federer and Andre Agassi are volleying at the breathtaking height of 600 feet above sea level on a court that at second glance appears too small. It is not the game that is at issue – the Dubai Duty Free Men's Open, endowed with a prize sum of one million US dollars – but the geopolitical positioning of the United Arab Emirates on the international economic platform. For its part, the helicopter platform on which this marketing event is being presented serves as a stage yet again, where only a year ago Tiger Woods assumed a typical golf stance for a highly publicized photo-shoot. Obviously we are dealing here with a *mise-en-scène* of imagery at the service of an overarching plan, which in turn makes the symbolic gesture of the architectural backdrop more than clear.

We are on the helipad of the Burj al Arab, the flagship of luxury hotels in the Gulf Emirates and emblem of the Sheikdom of Dubai. It is said to be a place so majestic that legends are born here. Displayed on license plates, the seven-star hotel instantly achieved the status of an icon that in both form and content expresses the state's desire for modernization elevated to the level of political program. Serving to galvanize national identity, the Burj al Arab as insignia stands for the promised land. All pretensions aside, Dubai's advertising brochures place the hotel in the same league as the pyramids of Giza, the Statue of Liberty, and the Sydney Opera House.²

A "success story" is being choreographed. While Dubai's agenda of national "upgrade" is directed toward diversification of the state's economic base, the established political practice aims to concentrate power in the hands of a chosen few. This development, of which some advocates of the free-market economy are envious, finds its justification in a new

1. Peter Sloterdijk, *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2005), 161.
2. Brochure, WS Atkins and Partners Overseas, *Burj al Arab – Arabian Tower, Architectural, Structural and Services Engineering Overview* (Dubai 1999).



DUBAI LICENSE PLATE WITH IMAGE OF THE BURJ AL ARAB.

form of political economy that signals a new paradigm of autocratic capitalism.

A look at the recent history of the region reveals one way to bring politics and economy into sync. The United Arab Emirates was founded in 1971, shortly after Great Britain's declaration to cede its colonial and protectoral rights. Since then, the Gulf States have been blessed with an exorbitant, fairy-tale-like economic boom due primarily to the extraction, if not exploitation, of large oil and natural gas reserves. The commercialization of so-called "black gold" continues to ensure the Emirates the status of a global player in the international market, a position authenticated by its entry into the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the main objective of which is to counter the hegemony of British and North American oil companies. Despite rejecting Western supremacy, and as bizarre as it might seem, it is nevertheless exactly what is rejected that is ultimately appropriated: the American Dream – taken to excessive heights – sets the standard for the nation's cultural directive and aspirations.

Aware of its all but depleted oil reserves, the Sheikdom of Dubai has deliberately branched out into new ventures to ensure its long-term economic sustainability. To satisfy its mercantile appetite, it must activate other resources. The pairing of business and tourism seems to offer an ideal scenario, effectively positioning Dubai as a hub with lucrative connections to European, Asian, and African markets. There is an abundance of sand, water, and palm trees which, when seen in a symbiotic relation with the build-up of business infrastructure, hints at an ingenious formula. On the one hand, tax-free zones grant multinational corporations unhindered operational freedom. On the other hand, necessary investments are made to put into place a lavish infrastructure, the objective of which is to stimulate the tourist industry. In order to secure high returns, the potential synergies between work and leisure are furthermore directed toward a specific sector, that of global players and high society – the *crème de la crème* of the current moneyed elite.

All signs point to luxury and its attendant promise to deliver the best of the best. In both production and consumption, luxury has always stood for excess, or as Georges Bataille suggests, for an expenditure of surplus energy that arouses a feeling of awe.³ The magical resonance that the term *luxury* evokes is defined here as an instrument of representation, and in extreme cases, as an expression of power. That such expenditure can be afforded signals that one

3. See Georges Bataille, *La Notion de dépense* (1933) as well as "Der Begriff der Verausgabung" and "Der verfeimte Teil," in *Die Aufhebung der Ökonomie*, trans. Traugott König and Gerd Bergfleth (München: Matthes & Seitz Verlag, 2001), 14. For further references to the notion of luxury see Georges Bataille, *La part maudite* (1945) or *The Accursed Share*, trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Zone Books, 1988), vol. I.

THE TOWERING ATRIUM OF THE BURJ AL ARAB. PHOTOS COURTESY THE AUTHORS.



stands above the norm and has left the principle of necessity behind. Despite turning a cold shoulder to the notion of utility within capitalism. As an accelerating force of the market economy, luxury begets luxury in an endlessly escalating spiral: the newer, the bigger, and more exclusive, the better.

Who stands behind this luxury economic mobilization of the nation? Who is meant when one speaks of the state? Who has power and who must submit to it? Who is master and who is slave? Current developments in the Gulf are tempered by a socio-political dimension that in no way suggests a straying from tradition. Modernization is wedded to Dubai's cultural convention, whether in the form of time-honored customs or religious practices. Tradition, in other words, assumes the role of legitimizing agent of the contemporary political order.

Societal ties are built on the tribal affiliations of the individual whose genealogical pedigree guarantees social status. The regulating principle of continuity is that of honoring the blood-rights of male descent. The hierarchical structuring of the collective body is generally accepted, at the head of

SHARED RESIDENCE INTERIOR OF LABOR CAMP, AL MIZHAR DISTRICT, 2005. COURTESY DIRK HEBEL AND DEANE SIMPSON.



which is the sheik, who enjoys the highest prestige. All matters of the nation – political, economic, and religious – are entrusted to him and his clan. Absolute power reigns insofar as family, state, business, and church are brought into a merger under the all-encompassing rule of the sovereign. It is therefore not surprising that the sheik-cum-monarch is reverently addressed with the British title “His Highness.” More than mere symbolic etiquette, the title underscores the extent of power conferred on the regent. Such a hyper-monopoly points to what is widely understood as a totalitarian regime.

There where lords are shall servants be. The dividing line between classes is more than obvious and in effect maintains a stringent two-tiered society. At the bottom is the foreign labor force, constituting more than three-quarters of the local population. These so-called expatriates come from the Indian subcontinent, East Africa, and increasingly – in order to uphold Dubai’s ties to Islam – from other Arab countries. They are in Dubai exclusively for work, whether in the oil industry, the building sector, or the tourist trade. To undermine their social integration, the duration of their residency is legally restricted to four years.

The formation of communities with rights is checked under any circumstance. The workers live in their allotted districts, in ghettos, or what are commonly referred to by human rights organizations as labor camps, at a safe distance from the neighborhoods of the ruling class. What is instituted unfolds with concerted discrimination and takes on the characteristics of political apartheid. One could argue that



CONSTRUCTED IMAGE OF PROPOSED TERRITORIAL REDEVELOPMENT OF THE SHEIKDOM OF DUBAI, NAKHEEL, REAL ESTATE AND DEVELOPMENT COMPANY, 2005. THE WORLD SEEMS TO FLOAT OFFSHORE.

after its official demise in South Africa, the concept of apartheid has now been generalized – cleansed of its racist stigma – and reappropriated by capitalism. This is the flip-side of comfort, the price paid for sustained luxury.

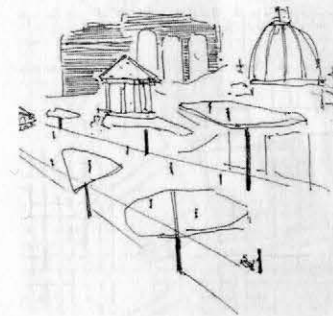
A political economy of space suggests a congruence between societal structures and the organization of urban form. Governance, trade, and city converge in an expanded notion of planning. Following an apparent logic of clearly determined steps, a total rearrangement of the territory is initiated by the sheik’s familial entourage, which is vested with the ability to bring both public and private sectors together in a form of partnership that puts planning solely at the service of real estate. To embody and physically anchor this institutionalized arrangement, designs are projected to deliver an ideal condition. But since such an enterprise is founded on totalitarian principles, architecture and urbanism have no choice other than to partake in the production of a totalizing world image.⁴

The emblematic project of this venture is the celebrated Palm, presented in the media as an icon to be seen by orbiting satellites in space. The view from above, however virtual it might be, underscores the elevated position of the viewer, a sublime perspective that enables one to look down on the world. The contours of the Palm increase the Dubai coastline, itself a limited resource, by a significant factor – a simple trick that accelerates the real estate market under the motto “reinventing beachfront property.” The sheik’s family, as one would expect, is the main shareholder of this gated city. Under their jurisdiction, laws were adapted to facilitate the purchase

4. Sloterdijk, *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals*, 14.

Fascism Under Erasure: A Proposal For Via dei Fori Imperiali in Rome

Paulette Singley



MASSIMILIANO FUKSAS, SKETCH FOR VIA DEI FORI IMPERIALI PROPOSAL. COURTESY THE ARCHITECT.

As Richard Meier's recently completed pavilion for the Ara Pacis indicates, Rome is slowly opening up to the possibility of new buildings in its fragile *centro storico*.¹ As strong opposition to the project also shows, such building is not without certain controversy. For example, to protest Meier's design, Vittorio Sgarbi, former under-secretary for culture in Silvio Berlusconi's administration, publicly burned a model of the building near the Mausoleum of Augustus on June 10, 2004. An even more sensitive Roman site than Piazza Augusto Imperatore, home of the Ara Pacis, is the archaeological park that encompasses the Republican and Imperial forums. Here, on a street that bisects all of the Imperial forums, Massimiliano Fuksas and Doriana O. Mandrelli have proposed a renovation plan that also has provoked certain controversy. Like Piazza Augusto Imperatore, where the fascists removed an entire neighborhood, demolished a concert hall that once occupied the Mausoleum of Augustus, and built a large piazza surrounded by monumental palazzi, the area around the forums was radically transformed under fascism, although with far less visible moves. At the Imperial forums, the work was fundamentally to demolish the Pan-tano, a Renaissance-era neighborhood, in order to reveal the Roman ruins hidden beneath it. Almost no new buildings were constructed, however, thus now that the fascists' propagandistic iconography has been removed, their urban design activities are invisible to the untrained eye. This invisibility, combined with recent archaeological work in the forums, makes the site a highly charged, political stage upon which Fuksas and Mandrelli have carefully placed their proposal to reanimate this part of Rome.

From July 2004 to January 2005 the exhibition "Forma: la città moderna e il suo passato" ("Forma: The Modern City and its Past") was shown in the Roman Coliseum.² Here, Adriano la Regina, the former superintendent of archaeology

of land by foreigners. From a business point of view, the undertaking is so successful that subsequent Palms are being planned. That the crown prince has become self-appointed designer is made more than evident by a poem he composed, which was promptly inscribed as planimetric calligraphy into the newest Palm.

At an appropriate distance from the coast, the most recent elaboration of dislocated fantasy is now taking shape. What appears as a mirage on the horizon is actually an archipelago of 300 islands tracing the contours of the world, a seemingly innocuous image superimposed onto the surface of the water. Again, the commodity traded is real estate, only now it is transformed into the floating currency of imagery. In order to up the ante and to give the work a patina of glamor, the project is studded with celebrities. As reported in the boulevard press, stars from film, music, and sports, such as David Beckham and Michael Owen, have already purchased islands, making one wonder if the city itself has not been branded by fame. Whether the rumors are true is hardly the issue, since what counts is not reality per se, but rather the surplus value of myth as cultivated through the representation of the world as image. "Dubai puts the World on the Map." The slogan used in the developer's advertising brochures underscores the enter-prise's ideological premise: Dubai is literally portrayed as a global city in the game of globalization. It is doubtful that this is what Martin Heidegger refers to in his essay "The Age of the World as Picture."⁵ But perhaps he was not on the wrong track, insofar as the images we construct of the world stand as a measure of what we are. The one-to-one alliance between political economy and territory in the United Arab Emirates seems to keep faith in the principle of understanding the world as image. Although Heidegger is careful to distance himself from any notion of image as caricature, the tendency to level everything through imagery is realized in Dubai, thereby lending credence to the proposition that the world is undeniably flat.⁶

5. Martin Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes" in *Holzwege* (1935-46), "The Age of the World as Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated from the German by William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

6. Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005).

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1. On Richard Meier's design for the Ara Pacis in Rome see John Seabrook, "Roman Renovation," *The New Yorker* (May 2, 2005).

2. All references to Fuksas's comments on the project are taken from a conversation with him on July 19, 2006, at his office in Rome.