The “State Philosophical” in the “Land without Philosophy”: Shopping Malls, Interior Cities, and the Image of Utopia in Dubai

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The relationship between literal and spatial discourse and spatial symbolism underpins the analysis of urbanism of Dubai, United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.). Are Imarati, or U.A.E. nationals (muwatinun), being swept up in historical forces too powerful for them to understand? Are so-called “modal” types of urban development exacerbating that process? It is argued that utopian discourse and symbolism form the link between historical and urban experience, mediating rapid social and cultural change. In this, the first part of a larger critique of the utopian self-representation of state-corporate complexes, I analyze how politics are aestheticized and made emotionally persuasive.

Les utopies ne sont souvent que des verités prématurées
— Lamartine

Abdelrahman Munif is today perhaps the best-known writer on the modern Arabian Gulf region. His novels about the fate of Harran, the fictitious oil boom city in the heart of Arabia, are more than any other works required reading for scholars of the region. Indeed, his Cities of Salt is perhaps the only book on the Gulf that has attained the status of a classic in the broader discipline of Middle Eastern Studies. It is helpful for our purposes to look at Munif’s dominant theme in this work. In the first book of the trilogy, Munif tartly summarizes the modernization of Harran:

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different from the existing ones began to form. In the midst of all this mutation, the indigenous inhabitants were unable to adjust to the new fast rhythm and the new relationships, and in their search for a new identity they became distorted. 

More:

Trees were cut down, people uprooted from their land, the earth dug up and oil finally pumped out only to turn the people into a crowd of open mouths waiting for charity or a crowd of arms fighting over a piece of bread and building an illusory future.

And simply: “this oil-based civilization is not real.”

Based on such passages, it is not a giant leap to conclude that Munif’s work falls squarely within a much broader tradition, that of the modern dystopia. Indeed, his descriptions of the development of the oil kingdom’s police state and its entry into ever more intimate corners of people’s lives, radically changing their personalities in the process, might have been grafted whole cloth from Orwell’s 1984.

Munif’s Harran has proved profoundly influential on work on the Arabian Gulf city, which assumes, simply, that the people inhabiting these cities went from bedu simplicity to modernity overnight, scarcely knowing how to absorb the changes, with destructive effects on their traditional society and supposedly heroic worldview. As an anthropologist reading Munif, however, I am struck by his implicit theory of culture, which assumes that the “traditional” culture (i.e., that of the nomadic bedu, which, Munif intends us to believe is by definition “simple,” “honorable” and “stoic”) is the very essence of the Arabian identity, while “modernity” (i.e., “urban,” “materialistic” and “hedonistic”) is simply an ill-fitting import from outside. Having completed more than a year’s fieldwork in Dubai, I have come to several different conclusions. First, bedu culture is actually a very small (if disproportionately important) part of overall Imarati (U.A.E. national) culture — and certainly it is much less important in the financial center, Dubai, than, say, in the capital, Abu Dhabi. Second, urban life and experience (especially that of markets and trade and, in general, settlement) has been an integral part of Dubai’s development for over a century.

Third, the very notion of an Arabian “culture” simply does not exist, unless we are willing to grant that this “culture” is in a perpetual state of flux. These observations amount, at the very least, to a serious challenge to Munif’s essentialism.

My most interesting conclusion, however, is that, far from experiencing change and modernity as a homogeneous dystopia, the inhabitants of Dubai have developed ways of culturally absorbing these changes. Furthermore, contra Munif, this mode is characterized by utopian thinking — utopian in the fundamental, structuring way meant by Karl Mannheim.

By looking at data gathered from interviews and archival materials collected during my fieldwork, I will make the case here that a certain type of idealized topos lurks behind both the literal and spatial discourses and symbols of the city. This is connected to the development over the last five years of certain types of built environment, particularly enormous shopping malls and other types of self-contained, more or less self-sustaining buildings and projects (figs. 1, 2). These projects are primarily intended as money-making operations, especially with the aim of increasing tourism and luxury consumerism; they are also “modal” in terms of the global ubiquity of the tourist-entertainment complex. Nevertheless, they also constitute a peculiar phenomenology in which the ideas of hybridity, interiority and enormity play an important role in the self-imagining of individual inhabitants of Dubai.

**Figure 1. (Left)** A typical Dubai view. Construction site at the “Tecom” complex, near the Jumeirah district of Dubai.

**Figure 2. (Right)** Exterior of the “Spanish Court,” one of five themed “civilization” stations at the Gardens Mall, December 2004. When it is completed, the mall will cover more than 115,000 square meters.
It might be tempting to deduce from the following a sort of apology for the rule and self-representation of corporate globalization. While I obviously wish to critique Munif’s reading of oil-based modernity, I also perhaps even more vig- orously attack the notion that the broader context of contem- porary Dubai, which basically consists of the domination of the corporate-state nexus, constitutes some sort of actual utopia. The story is complex: in fact, Munif’s observations about the reactionary nature of the modern Gulf state are keen, accurate, and applicable to Dubai; on the other hand, Munif dismisses the emotional power of state-corporate self- representation, especially in a context of rapid change and social uncertainty. This is the primary focus of the following observations. I end with a critique of the reactionary, pyra- mid-building corporate-state as an avenue of further research.

BASIC ANALYTICAL CONCEPTS: HYBRIDITY, UTOPIA, AND THE PHALANSTERY

Historically, periods of rapid, profound change have a salutary effect — from the anthropologist’s perspective, though not necessarily from the subject’s — on the develop- ment of the symbolism for the interpretation of those changes. Dramatic historical change tends to express itself in the most intriguing myths. In Europe, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were such a period when the new regime of industrial modernity witnessed the discursive and aesthetic creation of modern notions of “man,” “culture,” and “the market.” The twentieth-century critic Walter Benjamin wrote (or, more precisely, compiled) his beautiful wreckage, The Arcades Project, in eulogy of that heroic time. Some of Benjamin’s more productive observations in this work concerned a curious ambiguity within that century’s cultural life, the coexistence of the most “rhapsodic” lyricism alongside the “coldest” realism. Thus, the invention of architecture as “engineering,” of photography, and of the feuilleton, signaled the homogenization of cultural production and its entry into the market as commodities. The sweeping perspectives of Haussmann, the department store, and railway travel each also contributed, at the substructural and superstructural levels, to the new market demands on mobility, exchange and speed. Meanwhile, the era witnessed the cloaking of the new forms and means of production in the garb of the old: arcades with classical columns or ancient Egyptian iconogra- phy, fabricated materials posing as natural ones, department stores with “Oriental” themes.

For Benjamin, this mode of interpreting the present was inextricably bound up with the utopian imagination:

Each epoch dreams the one to follow. . . . [In these dreams] the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production. At the same time, what emerges in these wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated — which includes, however, the recent past. . . . In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history <Urgeschichte> — that is, to elements of a classless society.

The experience of the rapid flow of events, for Benjamin, appeared to be connected to a mode of historical interpretation that is tremendously selective and, in architectural jargon, “diagrammatic.” This type of selectivity, furthermore, is a dehistoricizing strategy that ushers in images of the “classless society,” a society that has transcended history and culture.

An important aspect of utopia is its deployment of hybridity, or the blurring of genres. The image of the utopia troubles and challenges the conventional oppositions of the status quo. Barriers that are taken for granted crumble, and the debris that results is juxtaposed in potentially novel, and therefore dangerous, ways. Thus Benjamin commented on one popular nineteenth-century image of utopia, the so-called “phalanstery” of Charles Fourier: “Hierarchy of children: juveniles, gymnasiars, lycceans, seraphim, cherubs, urchins, imps, weanlings, nurslings. The children are the only one of the ‘three sexes’ that can enter ‘straightaway into the heart of harmony’.” And:

Qualifying examination for the choir of cherubim:
(1) Musical and choreographic audition at the Opera.
(2) Washing of 120 plates in half an hour, without breaking one. (3) Peeling of half a quintal of apples in a given space of time, without allowing the weight of the fruit to drop below a certain level. (4) Perfect sifting of a quantity of rice or other grain in a fixed period of time. (5) Skill in kindling and screening a fire with intelligence and celerity.

The concept of the “phalanstery” warrants a few words. The phalanstery was the utopian community conceived in the early nineteenth century by Fourier — a total social institu- tion in which workers cooperated in producing goods with the aim of benefiting the welfare of the social body. But it was much more than that. According to Benjamin, the pha- lanstery would make morality superfluous. In other words, it was a utopia.

Significantly, it was perhaps because the phalanstery was never completely realized that it has been such a fascinating phenomenon; its role was much more productive in the realm of fantasy, a fact that can be observed in contemporary Dubai as much as in nineteenth-century Paris. Fourier’s fan- tasy was characterized by a number of (from our perspective) uncanny qualities: its massive size — phalanstries were meant to be cities of passages or arcades; its self-sufficiency — an inhabitant need not ever leave its confines; and its inte- riory, which entailed a re-creation, or fabrication, of natural
biospheres (indeed, one might say, an abstraction of nature into art). In all of this, the phalanstery was conceptually utopian, not only in the immediate ways just described, but in challenging conventional oppositions of nature-culture, outer-inner, and production-consumption. In short, the image of the phalanstery, rather than its literal realization, was to urban cultural production what the steam engine was to actual urban economic and infrastructural (roads, circulation) production.

On the other hand, as Benjamin was all too well aware, there was a gulf between the total aspirations of the Fourierist phalanstery and the reality of a class-divided or fragmented society. Whereas Fourier intended his utopian community to be a holistic institution, implying and trying to meet a complex and total human nature in its material, spiritual and instinctual dimensions, the dream space of the arcade (and even more so of the department store) witnessed the beginning of the decay of Fourier’s vision. Specifically, these spaces began to conflating human nature with “the consumer” (hence, for Benjamin, the revolutionary potential of the flâneur, who cultivates a resistance to the disciplinary power of high-capitalist culture). The situation of modern Dubai, and its claims to utopia, cannot be understood without an awareness of this conflation of the “human” and the “consumer.” In this sense, Dubai is encountering the final colonization of the genuinely utopian by an ever-improvising capitalism which, nevertheless, creates its own utopian self-representation (fig. 3).
and whose practices and worldview were consequently seen to be mixed. As an Arab informant in his mid-fifties said: “We [Arabs] didn’t really get into trade until after the [Second World] War. We saw it as beneath us.” A much older Arab informant, in his eighties, confirmed this, but only said that “this was something we didn’t really do [before the war].”

The ‘Iyem, for their part, viewed themselves as more progressive. As one twenty-four-year-old daughter of an old ‘Iyemi family said to me: “When my family first came to Dubai, they saw [the Arab inhabitants] as qarawiyin, [i.e., provincial — literally, village people].” This image of progressesiveness entailed a relative openness to Europe and to trade, two emblems of modernity much valued by many ‘Iyem of the generations before (and sometimes including) the contemporary one. Other ethnicities also appeared at different times during the twentieth century. Baluchis, Indians and Sudanese immigrants were present as early as the first decade of the century. And so-called “northern” Arabs, such as Iraqis, Egyptians, Lebanese and Palestinians constituted a significant proportion of immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s. Thereafter, however, the discovery of oil created the now-famous deluge of foreigners from dozens of different countries, with India, and especially Kerala, taking the lead in terms of absolute numbers. By and large, the groups did not mix, either socially or in terms of marriage, either with each other or with the local muwatinun (Dubai or Imarati nationals).

With regard to the Imarati local population, the muwatinun, such patterns of migration led to the emergence of another group alongside the aforementioned Arab and ‘Iyem. They are the descendants of so-called “mixed” parentage, i.e., those either with an Imarati father and a mother from a non-Gulf country, or those with a naturalized Imarati father. This category is often referred to by the vague moniker Arab al Khaleej, “Arabs of the Gulf.” I interviewed several of these mixed-category Imaratīs. The role of the experience of hybridity in the construction of imagined topoi is perhaps most clear in their stories.

One such person is Rana al Mudarris, a professional woman in her late twenties who works in the new Media City complex of Dubai Crown Prince Muhammad bin Rashid al Maktoum. Rana is the daughter of an Arab Imarati father and a Syrian mother. By her own account, her father’s travels and experiences with different cultures from India to Africa to Europe gave him a cosmopolitan worldview that deeply influenced her. The son of a mutawwaw (religious teacher), Rana’s father decided at an early age that his life was to be made in traveling the seas in search of trading opportunities. He met Rana’s mother while on a business trip to Damascus, and proposed to her through her father. Both of these factors, her father’s wanderlust and her mother’s Syrian background, helped Rana develop what she calls “open-mindedness.” During one of our interviews, I asked her to comment on a peculiar remark that one of her colleagues at Media City, an expatriate, had made:

AK: Tanya said that you are a second-class citizen. Is that true?
RM: (Laughs). Some people think this way. Not on a daily basis, but when it comes to marriages, and when it comes to talking about traditions, and all. They always prefer pure Arabs whose mother and father are from the region. So, for example, if there is a guy whose mother and father are from Dubai, he will think twice before proposing to me because my mother is not local.
AK: Why is that?
RM: They think they’re very pure. People from here look down on people from other countries, and they think that . . . , you know, al ‘irq al saa’id [lit. “the prevailing roots,” i.e., the roots, or ethnicity, prevail]. . . . [I] used to think that only British white people used to have this tafrīqa ‘unsuriyya [racial discrimination]. . . . [But here you can find it only when it comes to big decisions, like marriage, like all life-related things, I would say marriages and relations and . . . like, “don’t trust him, he’s ‘Ajami and he must be very bakheel [stingy]) or like “don’t trust him, he’s bedu, he must be very stubborn.” . . . But I think that the changing trend has started, because we started talking about it openly. We’re opening up, we’re discussing it. Because we used to just . . . “this is the rule. ‘Ajam is ‘Ajam and Arab is Arab.”

Maryam al Abbasi is another so-called Arab al Khaleej, her parents both having been born in another Gulf country. Her father worked in various different fields, mainly in business, and was close to the former ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed al Maktoum. By the time that her father had established himself as a naturalized citizen of Dubai in the early sixties, Maryam’s mother had only recently moved to the emirate. Her mother also subsequently became naturalized. Therefore, although both parents are considered for most intents and purposes fully Imarati, in certain contexts Maryam’s mother’s place of origin is foregrounded by other Imaratīs. For example, when after a great deal of convincing, Maryam and her mother persuaded her father to let Maryam study in the United States, Maryam’s behavior was “justified” by her mother’s foreign birth: “My being half [X] is sometimes used to excuse things. When I went abroad, people said ‘She went abroad because her mother is [from X].’ They do things like that.” If I don’t stick to the traditional rules, they say, ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter, she’s [from X].’”

This is related, in Maryam’s view, to a novel concept, marriage based primarily (although not exclusively) on individual choice, rather than familial persuasion. The way that her parents married was peculiar in its day. Her mother was initially betrothed by her family to her cousin, but she wanted to marry Maryam’s future father instead. She therefore had to find a solution to a difficult problem:

[M]y mom told . . . her father, not, “Listen, I’m in love with this guy. I want to get to know him, etc.” [She said], “I want to marry this man, he is a good man.” She didn’t
talk about loving [him] or anything [like that]. . . . 

[Rather, she said]: “He’s a good man, niyyatu saalha ma’3y [his intentions are pure], he has a good intention with me, he wants to marry me, and I want to marry him. I accept marrying him, so, do I have your muwafaqa [approval]?” And my grandfather, Allah yirhama [God rest his soul], said, “If your brothers also think he is a good man. . . .” [M]y grandfather never met my dad, he was ill. . . . “Then go ahead, don’t worry about your uncle, I’ll talk to him.” Because my mother really didn’t want that. So, that’s how it happened. I like to remind my father now that I’m a young girl and I’m refusing proposals and . . . that he actually did love my mother before he married her [smiles]. So you know, “Extend the same luxury to me.”

The aspect of both Rana’s and Maryam’s discourse that I would like to focus on is its use of hybridity. Specifically, it is hybrid in two ways. First, although both women are fluent in English and chose to answer my questions in that language, they freely interspersed Arabic into their responses. Second, to emphasize certain points and to strengthen the persuasiveness of their rhetoric, they used reported speech (“Then go ahead, don’t worry about your uncle . . .”).

To better understand the meaning of the first aspect, Arabic-English hybridity, we can refer this literal discourse to the spatial discourse of the ubiquitous shopping malls of Dubai (fig. 4). As part of this effort, I noted the shop-front signage at two popular shopping malls, the Jumeirah district’s Mercato Mall and Deira’s enormous City Centre.

At Mercato I found that in all cases where there were both English and Arabic logos, the name was transliterated into Arabic script (fig. 5). The only exceptions were, curiously, Kentucky Fried Chicken, which is translated into the Arabic Dajaj Kintoky, and the shops of the so-called “Arabian-themed” precinct of the mall, with its souvenir shops and rug merchants. One shop that sold the muwatin local dress, the thawb or kandoura (men’s gowns, usually white) and ghutra (headdress), bore an Arabic name, al-Thawb al-Watani, that was transliterated into English. I also noticed that a large proportion of the shops did not have either Arabic transliterations or Arabic translations. But in no case at

![Figure 4](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 4.** Transliteration of corporate logos from English to Arabic. Photo by Ines Hofmann.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENGLISH</th>
<th>ARABIC</th>
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<td>Promod</td>
<td>Bromod</td>
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<td>Patchi</td>
<td>Batshi</td>
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<td>Spinney’s</td>
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<td>Aldo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paul Restaurant,</td>
<td>No Arabic translation or transliteration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boulangerie &amp; Patisserie</td>
<td>No Arabic translation or transliteration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Virgin Megastore</td>
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<td>Polo Jeans Co.</td>
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<td>Boss</td>
<td>No Arabic translation or transliteration</td>
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<td>Armani Jeans</td>
<td>Armani Jeenz</td>
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<td>Top Shop</td>
<td>Tob Shob</td>
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<td>Starbucks</td>
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<td>Next</td>
<td>Nekst</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pizza Hut</td>
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**Figure 5.** The signage at Mercato.

Mercato was there an Arabic-only shop logo. While it is obvious that this is the result of issues of corporate branding, the shop signage is, nevertheless, significant in creating a spatial phenomenology of hybridity. Deira City Centre mall, whose very name has been transliterated into the Arabic Seeti Senter — instead of being translated into, say, Qalb al-Madina (heart of the city) or Markaz al-Madina (City Center) — exhibited the same pattern (fig. 6).

In these examples the fate of cafe names is particularly interesting. Arabic has a very well-known word for coffee, qahwa or gahwa, which, indeed, predates the English “coffee.” Nevertheless, the mall space has in this case transliterated one of the cafe names from “Starbucks Coffee” to Starbeks Kafeh — “Kafeh” being, in any case, not the Arabic transliteration for “coffee” but for “cafe.” Meanwhile, the other cafe name, Costa Coffee, is transliterated directly into Arabic. In order to correctly interpret the shopping-mall space, then, one has to have mastered a minimal pidgin language consisting of the names of Euro-American, and usually Anglophone, multinational corporations. Although not necessary, it is also helpful to be able to decipher these logos in English. And even where shop fronts at the malls do acknowledge Arabic, the overwhelming tendency is to transliterate the name of the given shop into an Arabic version (nonsensical from the perspective of Modern Standard Arabic) that would only make sense in the contexts of the mall and the wider global corporate culture that it represents. In other words, a certain minimal level of Western cosmopolitanism is required to interpret the shop signs in the mall.
ating a type of utopian blandness that offers symbolic security
Hybrid discourse, in short, seems to play a crucial role in cre-
tion, to hang out without running grave symbolic risks.
woman concerned about maintaining her
bles to the street there). Such places do not permit an Imarati
cafes are too male dominated and “open” (i.e., one is too visi-
t street-facing cafes, because they do not mind being seen
much more comfortable in shopping malls than in, say,
Maryam and other women informants affirmed, they are
dangerous aspects of defined urban places. Indeed, as
acultural, interchangeable atmosphere that neutralizes the
dangerous aspects of defined urban places. Indeed, as
both Arabic and English, as it were, “converse” with each other (albeit across an obvious power
differential); notions of purity — linguistic and ethnic —
become troubled; and novel concepts, such as marriage based
on individual choice, become less strange. In the case of the
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What these examples show is that in both the literal dis-
course of Rana and Maryam and in the spatial discourse of
the aforementioned malls there is an exercise in the blurring
of staid oppositions. Both Arabic and English, as it were,
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The second form of hybridity that invites comment
involves the skillful use of reported speech made by both
Rana and Maryam. Here is Maryam, for example, again on
traditional marriage practices:

For traditional Imaratis, the name of the family is very
important. They stress very heavily on the purity of the
lineage. “Is this family . . . are they [consistent] with our
old Arab ‘adaat and taqaleed [customs and practices]?”
. . . [Some ‘Iyem] don’t want a traditional Imarati.
They’ll say “hatha Badawi” [he is a bedu]. See, whereas
the bedu say it with pride, the others will say, “No,
we don’t want someone backward. We don’t want some-
body who does this and who does that.”

In the same way, Rana evoked a type of muwatin who
would talk about “stingy ‘Iyem” or “stubborn bedu,” or who
would dogmatically distinguish between the two ethnicities.
On the other hand, Maryam also referenced her grandfather
and her mother as they attempted to solve the thorny issue of
an arranged marriage. The reported speech, then, abstracts
aspects of experience or memory, and distances them from
the speaker, positioning the experience in such a way that it
becomes “diagrammatic” — i.e., boiled down to its essence,
or, rather, to that part of its essence that emotionally interests
the speaker. In other words, the reported speech renders the
experience in aesthetic form, permitting the speaker to con-
template the experience in a new light. It is, to adapt a
phrase from Coleridgean poetics, a “lamp” which illuminates
the experience, thereby giving it new meaning.

At one point in one of our conversations, Maryam al
Abbasi’s reflections turned poetic:

I think, when you look at the Arab world, you thank God
for a place like Dubai, really. Thank God for a place
where you have temples and you have mosques, and
where you have churches. Thank God. Thank God for a
place where you have more than one language. . . . Al
Hamdulillah [Praise God]. Ya’ny [I mean], there’s toler-
ance across many levels. Thank God we don’t have povery.
We have poor families, [but] nobody’s on the streets
without shelter and without food and going hungry.

That Maryam should evoke her home city in such terms
is related to the hybridity implicit in much of her and Rana’s
discourse. Just as the reported speech is idealized (i.e., it is
not literally reported speech but, rather, the alleged reported
speech of an idealized type — the muwatin, the father-figure,
etc.), so this image of Dubai is an idealized one. And
through it is constructed a certain ideal topos that gives
meaning to the experience of a rapidly changing urbanscape.

As the anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard has
famously argued, such notions have metaphysical rather than
literal ramifications with reality — “plugging the dams,” as it
were, of realities inexplicable with reference to the empirically
experienced world.” Just as the generative concept of
“witchcraft” provided Evans-Pritchard’s Azande with a meta-
physics by which to understand the otherwise inexplicable,
for many people of Dubai today, the ideal Dubai constitutes a
metaphysics that encompasses the profound changes under-
gone by the urbanscape and the traditional society during the
past thirty years, giving them both a concrete meaning and a
clearly-defined destiny.
THE SPATIAL-SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF A TOPOS: THE IMAGE OF THE PHALANSTERY

Another source of metaphysical “damming” is the image of the self-contained, gated corporate park, residential community, or giant multipurpose shopping mall. (In fact, these three types of project are increasingly merging into enormous developments that combine residential, entertainment, retail and tourism functions.) I call these projects, collectively, “late capitalist phalansteries” because of their symbolism of size, interiority or self-sustainability, and hybridity.

These projects, which began appearing on the Dubai-scape after the second half of the 1990s (i.e., shortly after the U.A.E.’s entry into the WTO in 1994), are an example of another form of the problematic utopian imagination in Dubai (Figs. 7, 8).

Although developers have already completed work on several giant projects, including the Crown Prince, Sheikh Muhammad’s so-called Media and Technology Free Zone (“Tecom”) and shopping malls such as Deira City Centre (with its twenty million visitors annually — a behemoth by any standard), the most ambitious projects are still either in
the process of construction or exist only in architects’ sketches and mock-ups. Three of the latter include the Mall of the Emirates project of the local developer Majid al Futtaim Group (MAF); the Burj Dubai (Dubai Tower) and Dubai Mall of Sheikh Muhammad’s EMAAR real estate developers; and the Dubailand themed entertainment/tourism/residential complex, also owned by Sheikh Muhammad. (There is an obvious trend here: the state’s, i.e., ruler’s, ownership of private, revenue-driven projects. This is one of the characteristic features of large-scale capitalism in Dubai, and is perhaps a source of what one scholar has called the “soft authoritarianism” of the Gulf emirate.)

Majid al Futtaim Group announced the beginning of work on the Mall of the Emirates in October 2003. To be completed in September 2005, the project was touted as the largest retail space in the world outside North America. The U.A.E. Dh 3 billion (approx. U.S. $800 million) project would cover more than two million square feet, and be expected to attract about 30 million visitors annually. The mall will have a four-hundred-room, a “five-star” hotel, more than 350 shops, a 7,000-space car park, fourteen multiplex cinemas, and, most interestingly, a 300,000-square-foot indoor ski resort.

Not to be outdone, EMAAR announced its Burj Dubai-Dubai Mall project on the heels of the MAF announcement. Seemingly mocking MAF’s claims of “largest retail space,” the EMAAR project was sized at five million square feet, “the equivalent of fifty football fields.” It would contain shopping districts, or “precincts,” that “in their area and variety can be described as shopping centers within a shopping center.” Within the mall’s confines shoppers would also find, [an] enormous aquarium with rare fish and sea creatures and during their visit shoppers will be able to see sharks . . . as they swim in the aquarium. Along with this, the aquarium provides impressive, captivating views of Burj Dubai. The mall also contains the world’s largest gold suq as well as a million square feet of clothing retailers.

Another impressive feature, according to a newspaper review, would be the “enormous lake” (buhaira dakhma) next to the mall which, with the connected garden and “meadows” (musattahat khadra’), would reach 2.6 million square feet in size. Relatively more mundane features included 2.5 million square feet of residential space, a 16,000-space car park, and another 1.5 million square feet of retail space connected to the lake and meadows.

In turn, dwarfing both these schemes, the Dubailand project was announced in October 2003, at a cost of U.A.E. Dh 18 billion (approximately U.S. $5.5 billion). Covering an area larger than the current downtown Dubai (over two billion square feet) the project is to consist partly in the following.

Three aspects of these propagandistic descriptions stand out: the emphasis on size (measured both in spatial and demographic — so-and-so many million tourists — terms); the self-sufficiency/interiority of the projects (a visitor or resident need not ever venture outside their gates); and the fabrication, literally or symbolically inside, of the natural or outdoor world (lakes, meadows, ski resorts, downtowns) (fig. 9). All of this constitutes a fairly literal adaptation of the American exurban model of elitist social and urban engineering. In other words, this type of real estate development does much more than simply provide the type of gated community that attracts the crowd “who follow the sun and advantageous tax laws.” Symbolically, it neutralizes the apparently dangerous, because uncontrollable, image of the natural sphere on the one hand, and on the other of the genuinely urban (figs. 10–12).

Since the aforementioned projects are still in the process of construction, it is difficult to collect data on how their spaces are interpreted by actual people. One symbolically if not entirely functionally similar project that does
already exist, however, is the so-called “Tecom” corporate park. Consisting of three large developments — Internet City, Media City, and Knowledge Village — this project, also owned by Sheikh Muhammad, is a so-called “freehold” development, where foreign companies, in this case in the knowledge, communications, and communications technology industries, can set up operations free of local tax or labor-law obligations. My interest here is in how utopia is imagined through such projects (figs. 13–15). In this regard, I recorded the following conversation, which transpired over lunch one day with three management-level employees of Tecom, Tanya, an Iraqi expatriate, Marcus, an American expatriate, and Nadia, an Imarati muwatina.

Tanya: People [at Tecom] are so conscientious. They don’t have to stay [after hours] but they want to. This is a continuously evolving place. The recruitment is by hand-picking. It’s selective. And every individual is unique. So you have a lot of complementarity.

AK: Would you say that this all has a campus feel?
T: Yes! That’s exactly what it’s like. I feel like I’m back at school. There is very strong camaraderie.

Nadia: The sense of community is part of the reason why I decided to join [Tecom].

T: I don’t know, maybe I’m romanticizing things, but I definitely think that people care about each other here. I had a friend who once worked here and who left for another company. She likes her job, but she definitely misses the sense of community here.

Marcus: The purpose of the community is to promote interaction. It is to encourage creativity, interaction . . . not just among individuals but among departments and companies. There are “best practices,” . . . certain companies are considered to have “best practices,” that companies lower on the chain are given an incentive to adopt. We definitely don’t want weak companies here. . . . A good question to ask is how has this community helped transcend national boundaries within its employees. [For example, you have Nadia. Among most locals] it’s taboo for a woman to sit with men, like now. . . . What this community is about is liberalism, or liberalizing oneself. [It teaches you] the necessity of cross-cultural interaction. You can’t isolate yourself, you have to communicate with others.

In the minds of both the developers of these projects and their everyday occupants, there is much more than a pecuniary interest at work here. Perhaps more important is the social dimension, one where barriers erected by tradition and a history of (allegedly) comparative unenlightenment are said to be dissolving. Here is Rana al Mudarris’ response to my question about why she thinks working at Media City is different from the conventional corporate job: “The image that Dubai is trying to build is Dubai is different. Different in terms of lifestyle, different in terms of the number of
nationalities that we have here, different in terms of concept. . . . It’s a trial, it’s in the future.” Working at Media City, for Rana, is no doubt related to personal and career considerations. But, as this comment shows, it is also about playing a role in producing a certain progressive image of the city as an ideal topos that, on the one hand, transcends the past and, on the other, prophesies the future. The following vignette, which appeared in April 2004 in a local daily, confirms the status of this representation as a collective one:

“They have a smart office in Knowledge Village. They have daily targets of business calls to be made; and they have deadlines to meet on information technology solutions for major clients such as Dubai Police and other Dubai-based businesses. But the employees of Techno Services Team (TST) are not IT professionals. They are young U.A.E. national women, who are all students of Dubai Women’s College.”

“Our students,” a professor is quoted as saying, “are at the forefront of breaking down barriers in the IT industry that has so far been dominated by men.”

FROM FOURIER TO THE CORPORATE STATE, OR THE CURIOUS APPEAL OF IDEOLOGICAL UTOPIA

As the last comment shows, the experience of these development projects is symbolically organized at the nexus of the past and the future, tradition and modernity, and of different identities. One of the standard themes invoked by employees of Tecom, not just Marcus but several others, involved the ways in which one has to overcome prejudices and national boundaries to be an effective employee of Media City, Knowledge Village, or Internet City. This was especially pronounced among the Imarati women I spoke to, many of whom, perhaps not coincidentally, come from less legitimated identities such as the Arab al Khaleej. Being marked both by gender and ethnicity seemed to give them a unique perspective on the sometimes surreal reality of life in a traditional society and a city that are changing at a breathtaking pace.

In his classic work on utopia, Karl Mannheim argued, pace Lamartine, that “utopias are often only premature truths,” and that what is utopian is only considered thus by representatives of an era that has already passed. Measured against the standards of the Imarati society that is receding into the past, where it was uncommon for women to study at a university let alone talk frankly to “strange” (i.e., unrelated) men or to travel abroad, the Imaratis I reference here are unconventional. In many ways, Maryam, Rana and Nadia are representatives of a new generation of Imaratis, those who have traveled abroad, usually to the West, often staying several years to complete a university degree. Maryam earned a bachelor’s from a well-known American university, and a master’s from an Ivy League school. Nadia had, at the
time we met, only recently moved to the U.A.E., having lived most of her life abroad with her diplomat father. Rana had studied at an American university in Dubai, and was a seasoned traveler. All shared an ethos of merit that was consciously fashioned within the context of a welfare state that lavishes services on its citizens well beyond their basic needs. All shared a desire both to maintain what they saw as good in “tradition” and to simultaneously challenge inherited assumptions about women’s place in society. All were enthusiastic about the Brave New World of Dubai that Sheikh Muhammad — a charismatic leader, if there ever was one — is seen to be single-handedly creating. It is for such a person — cosmopolitan, conversant in English (the language and the global corporate argot), and, as Rana put it, “open-minded” — that these projects seem to make the most sense.

An intriguing related issue, one that I did not have space to touch on, is how this new discourse of progress is replacing older notions of virtue and of the fully human. Future research should contextualize this sometimes exhilarating new world in its local roots. For example, muwatinun do see clear continuities between the older maritime trading culture and the newer system of rentier and investment capitalism. “In Dubai,” as they sometimes say, “al-tijara qabl al-din” (“business comes before even religion”).

Yet to conclude from the foregoing discussion that the situation of Dubai is actually utopian is premature and fatally partial. The broader context is starker, involving the complete top-down planning of a city by an authoritarian corporate state that is distinctly more interested in accommodating the needs of multinational corporations than the more holistic claims of individual subjects. The fact remains that Dubai subsists within a corporate cordon sanitaire, inside of which no tax laws or independent regulations exist to check the power of either state or corporation. Another sobering reality is that of the manual laborers from whose indefatigable and ill-recompensed labor the modern pyramids of Dubai emerge at blinding speed (figs. 16, 17). These multiethnic but predominantly South Asian workers have no rights to speak of, and, as an expatriate project manager once ironically told me, “they are sent home [if they overstep their ascribed function]. At least they don’t kill them, like the pharaohs used to do to their slaves.” One question to explore more deeply in future research, in fact, is how the absolute intolerance of the corporate state for any independent politics relates to the transmogrified images of unity and communitas evoked by the built environment. How does the mental energy normally taken up by praxis get diverted into the fantasy of utopia, or, in Freudian terms, how does repression engender dream images of closure? The image of utopia is not, to say the least, the sign of an actually utopian referent.

In their classic Dialectic of Enlightenment, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno made the now well-known argument about enlightened modernity. Taking the broad sweep, and incorporating the origins of enlightenment in Greek myth, Horkheimer and Adorno suggested that what began as a critical, demystifying, and liberating notion — enlightenment in the holistic sense — became reduced to instrumental rationality as a means of bourgeois social and natural domination. Far from increasing the liberation of humanity, enlightenment ended up enslaving it.42 There seems to be an uncanny parallel in the historical career of utopia as imagined through the built environment. Fourier’s phalanstery emerged from early-nineteenth-century European preoccupations with escaping and overcoming the corrosive environment of industrial capitalism. In this conception, the utopian community was genuinely utopian in two senses. First, it embodied a fundamental and radical critique of the status quo, thereby reimagining the basis of social life. Second, it implied a holistic notion of

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**Figure 16. (Left)** A maintenance worker at Knowledge Village prepares to clean up after students.

**Figure 17. (Right)** Welders at the Gardens, a giant shopping center mall project still under construction. At most sites in Dubai, work proceeds 24 hours a day, workers being bused in two to three shifts.
human nature. The community tried to see to it that the new human being to be cultivated within its confines would be fulfilled in all her natural faculties — mental, material, spiritual and instinctual. The brave new phalansteries of late capitalism, as exemplified by the giant complexes of Dubai, suggest a radically narrower definition of the human subject, one that ideally finds holistic fulfillment in the act of consumption. In thus conflating the “human” with the capitalist “consumer,” the new phalansteries might better be called, after Marc Augé, “banal utopias” rather than utopias proper (fig. 18). The notion of the utopian community, once radical, seems to have followed the arc discerned by Horkheimer and Adorno in the case of enlightenment: instrumentalization, accumulating narrowness, and the decay of its capacity to cultivate praxis.

We have, in a sense, returned to Benjamin’s insight, highlighted earlier in this paper, about the coexistence of fantasy and cold realism as the distinguishing feature of modernity. I have attempted here to give an account of the moral persuasiveness of the fantastic, dream-like dimensions of the urban. I have suggested that this is related to the social subconscious of an anxious society and historical period. Future research will have to develop this hopefully productive observation, as well as more systematically relating it to the other side of the coin, the realistic dimension. For now, it suffices to follow Ernst Bloch in “sift(ing) through the ruins of detotalizing cultures in search of the forgotten dreams, the ‘cultural surplus,’ that might anticipate the future.”

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Reference to the “Land without Philosophy” in the title of this article is taken from the writings of Thomas More. In Utopia (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), he writes that the ideal society would be a place where individuals live in a state of unreflective philosophical practice. Since their actions are motivated by the ideal society, the actions themselves are ideal, and therefore the society does not require a proper philosophy. This anticipates Walter Benjamin’s insight that the ideal social body would make “morality superfluous.” See Walter Benjamin’s The Arcades Project, H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p.16.


5. Ibid.


8. Dubai, like other Gulf states, is mind-boggling in its diversity, with more than 120 nationalities represented in its resident population. Here, I only deal with what is numerically a small part of this larger picture, the U.A.E. nationals (Arabic “muwatinun”). In general, I am critical of the facile identification by most writers (including myself) of the geography and “culture” of the region with the national state. As the historian James Onley, among others, has argued (personal conversations), objectively this is not at all the case: at the very least, Persians and Indians have had as profound an influence on the “culture” of the coastal Gulf as any other peoples. It is, however, with some reservation, and for considerations of space and of the coherence of this argument, that I too will identify the “culture” of Dubai primarily with that of the subjects of
the national state in this day.
11. See W. Schivelbusch, The Railway
Journey: The Industrialization of Time and
Space in the 19th Century (Berkeley:
12. The classic, and perhaps still best, work
on the department store is Emile Zola’s Au
Bonheur des Dames (The Ladies’ Delight), R.
14. Fredric Jameson put it another way: it is
a type of imagination that is condemned to
interpreting history only through its popu-
lar images of history. See F. Jameson,
Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late
Capitalism (Durham: Duke University
15. Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia, p.209:
“The form in which events are ordered . . .
appears in the utopia as an immediately per-
ceptible picture, or at least a directly intelligi-
ble set of meanings.” It is through hybrid
images and category-destroying icons that
Umberto Eco, for example, has his young
monks in The Name of the Rose repeatedly
challenging an authoritarian clerical elite
bent on controlling the interpretation of
texts. Thus, as an old man, the self-flagellat-
ing narrator, Adso, describes how as a young
novice he enjoyed an illicit encounter with a
peasant girl in the monastery kitchens: “. . . I
realize that to describe my wicked ecstasy of
that instant I have used the same words that
I used, not many pages before, to describe
the fire that burned the martyred body of the
Fraticello Michael . . . I experienced them in
the same way both at the time. . . .” U. Eco,
The Name of the Rose, W. Weaver, trans. (New
17. C. Fourier, Le Nouveau Monde Industriel
et Sociale, as quoted by Benjamin, Arcades
Project, p.641.
18. Benjamin, Arcades Project, p.16.
19. Thus Zola whimsically writes:
“Sometimes, she (Baudu) would get excited,
seeing the huge, ideal store, the phalanstery
of trade, in which everyone would have a
precise share of the profits according to his
or her deserts, as well as security for the
future, ensured by a contract . . . . All life
was there, everything was to be had without
leaving the building: study, food, bed and
clothing. Au Bonheur des Dames was suffi-
cient to its own pleasures and its own needs
in the midst of the great city, full of the
racket made by this city of work which was
thriving on the dungheap of old streets,
open at last to the full light of day.” E. Zola,
Au Bonheur des Dames, pp.34–49.
20. M.M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination,
M. Holquist, ed., M. Holquist and C.
Emerson, trans. (Austin: University of Texas
21. See, for example, S. Altorki and D.P.
Cole, Arabian Oasis City: The Transformation
of ‘Unayzah (Austin: University of Texas
Press, 1989), which discusses the parallel
but sometimes incomparable case of the
Saudi interior; Balfour-Paul, “Kuwait, Qatar,
and the United Arab Emirates”; F. Heard-
Bey, From Trucial States to United Arab
Emirates (New York: Longman, 1982); S.
Khalaf, “Gulf Societies and the Image of
Unlimited Good,” Dialectical Anthropology
17 (1992), pp.53–84, which discusses simi-
lar, but earlier, developments, in Kuwait;
and P. Mansfield, The New Arabs
23. To be distinguished from Farsi. Persians
began immigrating to Dubai in the first two
decades of the twentieth century. They came
primarily from the Gulf coast of the Persian
Empire, from towns such as Linga, Bandar-
e-‘Abbas, and ‘Awadh. These Persians were
Sunni, as opposed to the Shi’i (Farsi-speak-
ing) Persians of the rest of the empire. The
Sunni Persians, who had strong cultural and
trade connections to the Arab inhabitants of
the Gulf coast, became known as “‘Iyem,”
the Imarati dialect word for the Arabic
“Ajam,” meaning “Iranian.” This also
became the name of their specific dialect, an
Arabized Persian that was, and still is, dis-
tinct from the Farsi of the Iranian interior.
24. J.G. Lorimer, Gazetteer of the Persian
Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia (Amersham
England: Demand Editions, 1984), Vol.II.
p.455.
25. By “Gulf country,” Imaratis usually mean
any country that is a member of the Gulf
Cooperation Council, i.e., Bahrain, Kuwait,
Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the U.A.E.
Descendants of a “pure” Arab father and a
“pure” Arab mother from any GCC country
tend to be considered (theoretically) fully
“pure” (i.e., Arab) Imaratis. Since descent is
reckoned in relation to the father, the moth-
er does not necessarily have to be of Imarati
nationality, but she has to be of Arab ethnic-
ty, for the child to be considered pure Arab.
In practice, however, certain situations seem
to foreground Imarati identity over other
Gulf identities. For example, a woman who
behaves in unconventional ways, studying
abroad for example, and who is, say, of
Kuwaiti extraction, will be given more lati-
itude for the unconventional practice. This
hypothetical woman may be pure Arab
(because of GCC-Kuwaiti descent), but she
would not be expected to conform in this
case to the highest standards of honorable
behavior, of which only fully Imarati women
are seen to be the repository.
26. All names of individuals have been
changed.
27. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Witchcraft, Oracles,
and Magic Among the Azande (Oxford:
(October 2003), p.19.
29. Personal conversation with academic who
chooses to remain unnamed, September 21, 2003.
30. M. Nair, “MAF to Launch Dh 3b ‘Mall of
31. Ibid.
32. “EMAAR Announces the Dubai Mall
Project, the Biggest Shopping Mall in the
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. C.L. Jose, “Dh 18b Dubailand Project
37. C.L. Jose, “Government to Spend Dh
2.6b on Dubailand,” Gulf News, October 22,
2003.
38. Martin Giesen, Dean of the School of
Architecture and Design, American
University of Sharjah, U.A.E. Comment
made on the BBC Radio 3 documentary
“Architecture in Dubai,” (www.bbc.co.uk/
39. J. Kalsi, “Students Practice the Future,”
40. Ibid.
42. M. Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno, The


44. M. Jay, Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p.188.

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