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Zach Selke  
*Macalester College*

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**Offshore Urbanism:  
The Intersecting Roles of Neoliberalism and Historical Memory  
In Creating Dubai's Palm Jumeirah**

by Zach Selke



### **Prologue: The Opening of Atlantis Dubai**

November 2008 marked an important celebration in the recent history of Dubai. The Atlantis hotel on Palm Jumeirah, the first of several luxury hotel properties planned for the island, was ready for its first guests. Charlize Theron, Lindsay Lohan, Michael Jordan and Robert DeNiro were among the celebrity guests at the \$20 million event which featured a firework display visible from space (Dickey, 2008). South African Hotelier Sol Kerzner, Chairman of Kerzner International and Ahmed Bin Sulayem, Executive Chairman of Nakheel, the developers and operators of Atlantis, were on hand to introduce the hotel and Palm Jumeirah to the world. However, the tenor of the evening was less than euphoric as the global financial crisis had hit the shores of the seemingly invincible post-modern city. Christopher Dickey of *Newsweek* writes, “More than any other place on Earth, this city-state in the United Arab Emirates is the creation of worldwide commerce, a specialty-built magnet for the kind of hot money that seeks the quickest, highest profits and then moves on when they disappear” (Dickey, 2008). As real estate prices fell and construction projects dried up, Dubai’s foreign workforce began losing their jobs in droves. Dickey suggests layoffs in Dubai will have a visible affect on the working-class neighborhoods of Manila, Mombasa and Thiruvananthapuram as migrant workers returned to a depressed economic climate.

After the hotel’s glamorous opening, my mother and I visited the property in January 2009 while on a stopover in Dubai returning to the U.S. from India. We made reservations at the Burj Al Arab hotel for brunch, as this was the cheapest way to gain access to the self-proclaimed seven star hotel and Dubai’s first venture into offshore urbanism. We gave proof of our reservation to the security guards controlling the single

bridge connecting the hotel to the mainland, and proceeded into the opulently gilded lobby. Hotel staff previously said we would be restricted to the lobby and the basement-level restaurant. However, after hearing about the epic views of Palm Jumeirah from the top floors of Burj Al Arab, we tried to reach one of these privileged vantage points. After pressing a button for a high floor, we heard a strong beeping noise before the button we had pressed ceased to illuminate. Clearly, some security guard had foreseen our plan and acted to protect hotel tenants from the likes of us.

After leaving Burj Al Arab, we ventured to Dubai's famed Palm Jumeirah and the recently opened Atlantis. Our Indian taxi driver told us there were two entrances to the hotel: the public entrance led to a small promenade of shops while the private entrance took hotel guests to the supposedly magnificent lobby. As our taxi neared the lobby entrance, a pleasant looking security guard approached us. He asked us for our names and whether we were hotel guests. We replied that we were not but would like to look inside the lobby. He politely said that was not possible and directed us to the public entrance of the hotel. After wandering around the stores selling Atlantis-labeled swimsuits and the Coldstone Creamery, we realized there was nothing else we could see without paying. We could not see the miles of added beachfront on Palm Jumeirah, much less walk on it. There seemed to be little the celebrated island could offer us besides the thrill of telling our friends we had "seen" the infamous Palm Jumeirah.

## **Introduction**

Over the past 30 years, the port city of Dubai has emerged from relative obscurity to become one of the most affluent travel and business destinations in the world. Dubai is host to the world's largest shopping mall, tallest building and an island chain in the shape of a palm tree, among other man-made curiosities. Dubai bills itself as a manifestation of "21<sup>st</sup> Century Arabia." However, the contrasting lives of wealthy Arabs and Westerners within the city and the workers who live on the peripheries challenge the popular portrayals of Dubai as a land of fantasy. Juxtaposing the experiences of European and South Asian immigrants illuminates the notion that Dubai is actually two separate cities. The "visible" Dubai, epitomized by the palm-shaped island of Palm Jumeirah, is a city of extraordinary wealth and endless possibilities for those who can afford to participate. The "invisible" city lies in the shadow of the newly erected skyscrapers, consisting of densely populated slums from which the "builders of the city," migrant laborers from South Asia, commute everyday to physically build the seemingly miraculous construction projects.

Dubai proves an important place of examination because it occupies a particular space between the Western and Arab worlds. The rift between these two spheres has been well documented, with 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have created seemingly insurmountable tensions between the United States and Middle Eastern nations. However, prominent voices such as *New York Times* editorialist Thomas Friedman have likened Dubai to a bridge between these two opposing forces. By this, Friedman means that Dubai has embraced Western philosophies and rejected the "backwards tribalism" he associates with the Arab world. He espouses that Dubai has embraced western ideals of human rights, yet the stories of migrant workers seem to contradict this. The city, often

labeled as one of hyperboles, prides itself in its constant change and progress. While many in the West hail Dubai as a beacon of modernity in the stereotypically “backwards” Middle East, this paper will seek to reevaluate Dubai’s rapid transition over the past few decades. Popular representations of Dubai and its monumental construction projects emphasize this modernity, but a closer read finds that these texts are grossly misleading on how the city’s massive construction projects come to be. Palm Jumeirah is the result of neoliberal economic decisions made by Dubai’s governing elite that facilitate the exploitation of cheap labor sources and the movement of financial capital from the global upper class, to whom the development is marketed as one of unimaginable luxury and security. Furthermore, the historical memory of Dubai as pre-modern and the global trends towards privatization are motivating the actors involved in creating Palm Jumeirah and shaping the island into a particular vision for future development: one that supports individualism and presents the private enclave as a way to be “free” from the burdens of society.

The sources I examined for this paper include emerging scholarship on Dubai from U.S., European and Arab writers. Popular texts also held an important role in my examination, as both Dubai and Palm Jumeirah are heavily marketed and discussed in media outlets. While I made an effort to focus my examination on the specific actors and institutions involved in making Palm Jumeirah, some of my information will be more generalized to the larger Dubai context. This may not be the most accurate way of describing how Palm Jumeirah came to be, but the mechanisms through which the government of Dubai, multinational corporations and migrant laborers interact with each other are largely similar across Dubai’s monumental construction projects.

This essay will engage with the development of Palm Jumeirah using the political economy of place as a theoretical framework to examine the institutions and actors involved in making the island. The first section will outline the historical perceptions of Dubai and its relationship with the West. The second section of this paper will look at relevant theoretical frameworks in urban studies, including the political economy of place. Additionally, I will examine the evolution of neoliberal economic policies that have deeply influenced the government of Dubai and Western investors in projects like Palm Jumeirah. The third section will examine the evolution of the Palm Jumeirah project its relevance to political economy of place and neoliberal theories on development. I will conclude with thoughts on what Palm Jumeirah represents for Dubai and its implications for future development.

### **A Brief History of Dubai: Portrayals of the City from the West**

Modern Dubai offers few physical reminders of its past, but the city's history illuminates significant events in establishing a relationship with the Western world. Until 1930, the city was best known as a trading post for pearls and other commodities. The city had become a colonial interest of the British due to Dubai's strategic location between India and Great Britain. The World Wars, however, led to a steep decline in the pearl trade and marked the withdrawal of Great Britain's colonial presence in Dubai and much of the Arab world (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 66). Martin Hvidt, a scholar on Middle Eastern studies at the University of Southern Denmark, argues "a critical juncture took place in [the] early twentieth century when the ruler of Dubai chose to provide economic incentives for the Persian-based merchant class to relocate to Dubai. It instituted an extreme pro-business path on which Dubai has based its subsequent development."

(Hvidt, 2007, p. 559). The discovery of oil in the late 1960s allowed Dubai to reemerge as a city of global importance, attracting immigrants from other Gulf states and South Asian countries. The government of Dubai awarded British companies with contracts to extract oil from Dubai's sands. These companies were heavily reliant on cheap labor from India and Pakistan as immigrant labor constituted 50 percent of Dubai's population in 1968 (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 65).

Before the discovery of oil, however, Dubai had been exoticized by the Western media as a romantic but primitive representation of life in the East. A 1956 article from the London *Times* emphasized Dubai's primitiveness by referencing Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*:

One look at Dubai and you think of Conrad. Somewhere surely along this exotic creek, where the dhows lie bow to stern under ragged and piebald flags and the boatmen leave their passengers under white awning from shore to shore, like Venetian gondoliers, somewhere a broken giant of a white man must be expiating a fearful sin- the Lord Jim of the Trucial Coast. The thought has its significance, for it places Dubai where it belongs, squarely in the nineteenth century. It is the Persian Gulf before oil. There could be no Lord Jims in Kuwait (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 73).

Dubai was portrayed as backwards not only in the global context, but within the Middle East region as well. A 1961 article from *The New York Times* mentions Dubai written by Marion Stelling on her travels to the Orient. She describes traditional fish markets and bazaars in the 'ancient' town. Her article includes descriptions of poverty, but she also likens the city to Venice because of the city's harbor (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 72). A need to overcome earlier associations of Dubai with financial struggle and perceptions of the city as lacking modernity may explain why the current rulers of Dubai are so adamant to construct the city as a hyper-modern example of urban development.



Growing oil wealth began to transform the spaces of Dubai during the 1970 and 80s. The city experienced suburban development and city planners made an effort to use Western models of growth. The district of Jumeirah, known as Dubai's "Los Angeles suburb," was a development that featured large houses separated by the desert and armed private militias that guarded the homes of important expatriate officials (Elshestawy, 2010, p. 106). Jonathan Raban, a British traveler writer and journalist, noted that the district was "divided into two parts: one occupied by rich and opulent palatial mansions and the other dominated by miserable shacks." (Elshestawy, 2010, p. 106). Expensive villas with views of informal settlements emphasized the need for Dubai's elite to create a more efficient mechanism for the physical separation of rich and poor.

Dubai made a tremendous effort in the 1980s and 90s to attract foreign investment to the city. However, the level for foreign direct investment (FDI) significantly increased in 2001 following the 9/11 terror attacks (Hvidt, 2007, p. 563). In order to attract investment, Dubai strives to provide modern infrastructure, pro-business legislation, and a lean bureaucracy (Hvidt, 2007, p. 563). Dubai's range of tax-free zones, which include its ports, have resulted in minimal government oversight in these areas. American forces used the ports of Dubai as a refueling point during the Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq. As Dubai transitions from an oil-based economy to one based in the tourism and service sectors, the city will derive all of its GDP from non-oil activities by 2010 (Davis, 2007, p. 55). In order to facilitate this transition, Dubai must present itself as a global destination of monumental scale. In recent times, Dubai has succeeded in shifting Western perceptions of the city as "backwards" to one that has embraced modernity.

In Thomas Friedman's March 2006 *New York Times* editorial "Dubai and Dunces," he describes the congressional debate over whether a Dubai-based company should oversee some U.S. ports as ignorant and xenophobic while describing Dubai as "the sort of decent, modernizing model we should be trying to nurture in the Arab-Muslim world" (Friedman, 2006). He continues to describe Dubai as an internally generated evolutionary phenomenon while the rest of the Arab world is "still highly tribalized and struggling with modernity" (Friedman, 2006). He recognizes what he believes as the problem in the Arab-Muslim world through an interview with an Arab-American psychiatrist on Al Jazeera who describes the clash between the Western and Arab world as one between "civilization and backwardness, freedom and oppression, human rights and the violation of these rights" (Friedman, 2006).

Friedman's opinion that Dubai serves as a just role model for the Middle East, especially in terms of human rights, seems to be contradicted by the exploitation of foreign workers in the building of the city. A more likely explanation for the support Dubai has received from the West involves economic motives. The free trade zones within Dubai have offered American and European businesses the facilities in which to reach emerging markets in the East. In 2005, an *ABC News* correspondent wrote, "One of the ways that this trading town along a creek has reformulated itself into a megalopolis is by throwing in everything and the kitchen sink as incentives for companies to invest in and relocate to Dubai. There are free-trade zones where 100 percent foreign ownership is allowed, with no individual or corporate taxes or import/export duties whatsoever" (Davis, 2007, p. 65). These free-trade zones have enriched the lives of many Western businessmen as well as facilitated the movement of U.S. troops and weapons around the

region. The government of Dubai clearly plays an important role in facilitating the movement of global capital through the city.

### **Defining the Political Economy of Place**

The political economy of place provides a mechanism through which we can examine the interactions between the actors and institutions that have shaped and continue to shape the built environment of Dubai. One of the most important facets of this perspective involves the conflicts that arise when space is commodified. Space presents numerous challenges to the typical notion of a commodity as the stakes involved are not only financial nor are they exclusive to the purchasers and sellers of space. People are highly connected and concerned with their spatial environment. An individual's quality of life is dependent on the community he or she lives in. This community influences the social and professional networks of the individual and provides an important resource for an individual's growth, both economically and emotionally. The idea of a larger community complicates the commodification of space as a large number of people have an investment in spaces that may be owned or controlled by others. The presence of security and access undeniably valuable to an individual resident, but larger forces are responsible for ensuring these attributes are present.

Logan and Molotch offer a social typology of place entrepreneurs, or people directly involved in the exchange of places and collection of rents. They divide these individuals into three categories: serendipitous entrepreneurs, active entrepreneurs and structural entrepreneurs. Serendipitous entrepreneurs are ones who circumstantially own property that happens to be valuable to others. Active entrepreneurs seek out properties that they believe will have changing use values that will benefit them in the future. These

entrepreneurs must be able to envision future growth patterns to ensure their property values will rise over time. Particularly interesting, however, are the structural speculators as they seek to alter future growth patterns by altering the conditions that affect the market. Structural speculators seek monopoly rents through the manipulation of organizational structures. In many cases, the will of these entrepreneurs are brought about through lobbying with government officials (Logan and Molotch, 1987, 30).

The development of Palm Jumeirah highlights an important mentality among Dubai's elite in which they are vested with the authority to shape the city's physical landscape at their whim. Ahmed Kanna and Arang Keshavarzian characterize the current development occurring in Dubai and Abu Dhabi in an article entitled "The UAE's Space Race: Sheikhs and Starchitects Envision the Future." This title seems to allude to thoughts by Logan and Molotch on the idea of structural speculators. The developers of Palm Jumeirah are certainly doing more than envisioning future growth trends. They are physically creating a new space in the shape of what they believe people will want. However, the developers of Palm Jumeirah do not leave the desirability of their properties to chance. They actively market the island as a spectacle of mankind's ability to shape not only our built environment, but the natural environment as well. Palm Jumeirah also presents a complication to Logan and Molotch's definition of a structural speculator because the government of Dubai directly controls the developers. The government of Dubai is known for playing "a central role in regulating labor markets and creating circuits of rent and profit" (Kanna and Keshavarzian, 2008, p. 38). Institutional mechanisms are in place to support the development of Palm Jumeirah, such as the government's decision to allow foreigners to own land (previously only 99-year leases

were permitted) and the ease with which Palm Jumeirah property owners can obtain visas to live in Dubai. The mostly European-born owners of property on Palm Jumeirah have a streamlined path to residency while the South Asian workers who built the island are unable to stay longer than they are needed.

While the value of forming strong communities cannot be understated, we must also note that communities are inherently exclusive and have not formed organically over the course of history. Suburban developments in the United States have been heavily marketed utilizing airs of exclusivity. During the 1920s, Frederick Olmsted, Jr. created a development of Spanish colonial houses with community members that celebrated Mexican feast days, even though Mexican-Americans were restricted from buying homes in this enclave (Hayden, 2004, 68). The legacy of exclusionary housing policies extends well beyond this time period as loan restrictions, redlining and deed restrictions continued to keep people of color from entering suburbia. These policies ensured that residency in a suburban community represented a privileged position. While a place in suburbia was marketed as an earned position for those who could afford it, the path to homeownership was filled with impediments for people of color and streamlined for white Americans. In a similar fashion, Dubai has created exclusive enclaves for its wealthier residents. Developments like Palm Jumeirah, however, indicate a movement towards the building of what Peter Marcuse has labeled as “citadels” in the urban context. These developments represent “spatially concentrated areas of wealth in which members of a particular population group, defined by its position of superiority, in power, wealth, or status, in relation to its neighbors, congregate as a means of protecting of enhancing that position” (Marcuse, 1997, p. 247). Although similar in some ways to the gated

communities of North America, Palm Jumeirah's barriers are less visibly hostile. The gentle waters of the Persian Gulf surrounding the island and the privatized spaces within the island ensure undesirables remain excluded.

### **The Importance of Geographic Scale in the Political Economy of Place**

The mechanisms that drive urban growth operate within a complex network of individuals and institutions. Globalization has greatly complicated this network in Dubai, which is a city at the pinnacle of transnational development. The idea of scale becomes vitally important when looking at the political economy of place as it allows us to better understand the larger ramifications of localized developments and the influence of larger trends on individual developments. Geographer Kevin Cox discusses issues of scale and presents a dichotomy involving spaces of dependence and spaces of engagement. Cox writes, "Spaces of dependence are defined by those more-or-less localized social relations upon which we depend for the realization of essential interests and for which there are no substitutes elsewhere" (Cox, 1998, p. 2). While spaces of dependence are characterized by localized relationships, they are intersected by other centers of power that include government and the press. Cox characterizes this as a space of engagement or "the space in which the politics of securing a space of dependence unfolds" (Cox, 1998, p. 2).

The effect of globalization on this dichotomy becomes important when examining politics in Dubai. Many urban developments within the city are created by the government of Dubai, but rely on international investors to actually fund these projects. Additionally, many of these projects are built for the use of expatriates and transnational corporations. The labor capital required to build the urban landscape of Dubai also requires an imported source. These circumstances complicate and impede local politics

within Dubai. Dubai's foreign workforce proves difficult to organize across language, cultural and religious barriers. The transnational developers and construction companies that the government of Dubai utilizes to carry out its massive construction projects are left unaccountable for their labor policies. These companies are attracted to Dubai because of the access to cheap sources of labor and the difficulties that Dubai's laborers have in responding to their working conditions.

### **Neoliberalism and Capitalism in Dubai**

As the early 1970s marked a period of economic stagnation for the United States and other parts of the world, scholars such as David Harvey argue there was a shift from Keynesian economic policies to those emphasizing "laissez-faire" policies that minimize the role of the state. In May 1979, Margaret Thatcher was elected British Prime Minister and later declared, "no such thing as society, only individuals and their families" (Harvey, 2006, p. 17). Harvey describes the implications of Thatcher's statement in the following: "All forms of social solidarity were to be dissolved in favor of individualism, private property, personal responsibility and family values" (Harvey, 2006, p. 17). This neoliberal turn in the West greatly influenced how the government of Dubai, sometimes referred to as "Dubai, Inc." conducts business. Dubai's similarities to the Asian city-state of Singapore led Ahmed Kanna, a prominent scholar on Dubai, to evoke Aihwa Ong's description of the relationship between Singapore's government and citizens in describing Dubai. He summarizes Ong's argument in the following: "The state's aim was to create or engineer 'valuable citizens,' competitive on a global scale and adaptable to neoliberal norms of entrepreneurialism, creative thinking, and individualism" (Kanna, 2010, p. 103). In the Dubai context, this translates into a government that encourages

citizens to maintain their “traditional culture” in a way that is hospitable (and not isolating) to Westerners.

Dubai’s government, inline with the “entrepreneurial spirit” supported by neoliberal voices in the West, encourages its citizens to work in spite of the fact that all citizens are entitled to government-supported housing, healthcare and pensions. These workers, most of whom work for state-owned enterprises such as Palm Jumeirah developer Nakheel, must negotiate between traditional ways of life and modern business practices. Kanna highlights this perspective in the following: “For Dubai to be truly global and modern, Dubayyans should reduce their evaluation of family background, how they fit within the system of pedigree, and begin to frame their values in terms of individual merit, entrepreneurialism, work ethic, and willingness to self-improve” (Kanna, 2010, p. 106). These efforts to shape Dubai’s citizenry are made in order to create a more palatable environment for Western investors.

The idea of the “camp” also proves essential in reaching an understanding of development in Dubai and capitalist urban development. The city’s dependence on foreign labor requires physical spaces to house workers. These labor camps exist on the fringes of Dubai and represent highly regulated and surveilled spaces. Michiel Dehaene and Liven De Caeter define “camp” in the following:

The camp properly speaking is, according to Giorgio Agamben, not an extension of the law like the prison, but rather a space that is extraterritorial to the law- a space where the law is suspended. While the encampment emerges out of the nature-state and moves towards the city, and therefore fulfills a proto-political role, the camp marks the disintegration of society in the state of exception. The camp is, in other words, the situation in which the division between private and public is suspended. It is the space where the city is annihilated and the citizen reduced to ‘bare life.’ Today, more and more people are exposed to the conditions of bare life: the homeless, the illegal immigrants, the



inhabitants of slums. From military camps via refugee camps and from labour camps to detention centres and secret prisons, the camp is the grimmest symptom of a postcivil urbanism, which follows the disintegration of the state.” (Dehaene and Caeter, 5)

In some sense, these camps are yet another manifestation of the free-trade zones developed for multinational businesses. These camps represent spaces where the government does not interfere with the conditions maintained by construction firms. Migrant laborers in the camps are not citizens of Dubai, and are not privy to the enormous welfare and health benefits provided to native Dubayyans by the government. Camps are specifically designed not to be spaces of engagement, as workers are discouraged from establishing any form of worker solidarity. Labor camps in Dubai are invisible to the common tourist or business traveler, but are essential in creating projects like Palm Jumeirah and maintaining the services of the city.

### **Envisioning Palm Jumeirah**

The creation of Palm Jumeirah did not follow the trajectory laid out in marketing campaigns by the government of Dubai and its leader, Sheikh Mohammed. The artificial island was the informed by and the result of several intersecting histories. The past perceptions of Dubai as an underdeveloped village created a need for the city’s government to make active efforts to prove its modernity on the world stage. The discovery of oil and subsequent wealth enjoyed by Dubai’s government in the later parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century generated the initial capital needed to develop Dubai into a modern metropolis. Intensifying globalization greatly influenced the actors involved in creating Palm Jumeirah, from the South Asian laborers to the transnational corporations and developers responsible for building the island. Trends from North American suburbanization became a blueprint for development in Dubai, leading to the large indoor

malls and car culture present in the city. Gated communities offered an important template for Palm Jumeirah as the extensive efforts to control and surveil the spaces of the island are apparent, as well as its exclusionary nature. The result has been an example of the “future of development” given the neoliberal trends in global societies: a privatized island with little public space where the individual reigns supreme. The presentation of Palm Jumeirah to the world as a modern marvel of human ingenuity and the entrepreneurial spirit emphasize the role of neoliberalism in shaping the island’s development.

Legends surrounding the origins of Palm Jumeirah involve Sheikh Mohammed, the leader of Dubai, drawing the shape of the date palm and ordering his staff to “make it happen.” The island, however, emerged from a very practical need to increase beachfront real estate in Dubai. Sheikh Mohammed had told Sultan bin Sulayem, a Dubai port boss, that he was looking for ways to add coastline in Dubai. Bin Sulayem met with Warren Pickering, a New Zealand architect, while on vacation in Australia (Krane, 2009, p. 152). Pickering was commissioned to create concept drawings for an artificial island with a lagoon and beach. His initial sketch featured a crescent-shaped island that looked like two cashew nuts (Krane, 2009, p. 152). When Sheikh Mohammed saw the drawing upon bin Sulayem’s return to Dubai, he requested a design with more beachfront and suggested the national symbol of the UAE, the date palm, be a template for the design. (Krane, 2009, p. 152). Pickering offered several options on the theme of a palm, but the single palm with sixteen curving fronds and a crescent-shaped back wall was the ultimate design picked by Sheikh Mohammed.

The Nakheel Corporation, one of several state-run enterprises, was established to build Palm Jumeirah and other future offshore developments. The company provides an example of how the government of Dubai is blurring the private-public divide. The mechanisms through which public-private ties are maintained do not seem to have an official state structure, but rely on informal channels that facilitate the relationship between the public and private sector (Hvidt, 2007, p. 567). Informal social gatherings of men, known as *majalis*, have a tradition in Dubai as spaces linking ruling figures with business and community leaders. Hvidt writes, “At any *majlis*, guests discuss current events and business, watch television, have tea and sweets, and make deals. The enduring popularity of this phenomenon guarantees that news travels from one *majlis* to the next, eventually reaching Sheikh Mohammed’s *majlis*, where important strategic decisions regarding the emirate are often made” (Hvidt, 2007, p. 568). These informal meetings have been considered part of the “open-door” policy, through which Sheikh Mohammed remains accessible to the city’s elites. These informal meetings clearly represent spaces of engagement, where local interests and politics are discussed between the city’s elite members. This system of governance proves essential in understanding how companies like Nakheel maintain close ties with Dubai’s ruler as well as how Dubai’s ruler supervises and controls developments like Palm Jumeirah.

### **Building Palm Jumeirah**

The building of Palm Jumeirah required unique construction techniques operating on an unprecedented scale. The first of three palm shaped islands to be constructed by Nakheel Corporation, Palm Jumeirah is the only one that is complete. The island is comprised of sixteen fronds surrounded by twelve kilometers of protective barrier reef

and extends five kilometers into the Persian Gulf (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 143). Together, the formation of the three islands of the Palm Trilogy will cost around U.S. \$60 billion (Elsheshtawy, 2010, 143). Palm Jumeirah, the smallest of the trilogy, added 120 kilometers of beachfront to the city's original 67 kilometers and is expected to have 80,000 inhabitants (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 143). Development on the island has been focused on tourist and residential properties. Palm Jumeirah was not financed by banks, but paid for by the government of Dubai using investors' cash (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 155). The dredging work conducted by Dutch firm Van Oord ACZ alone cost \$275 million as 95 million cubic meters of sand and rock were brought to the surface using a technique shown in the image below (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 15).



The unprecedented scale of Palm Jumeirah has led to environmental concerns about the construction process that created the island as well as the sustainability of construction on the island. Samer Bagaen notes these concerns in the following: “As a

result of the dredging and re-depositing of sand for the construction of the islands, the typically clear waters of the Gulf have become clouded with silt. Construction is reportedly damaging the marine habitat, burying coral as well as other species dependent on them for food. Oyster beds have been covered in as much as two inches of sediment, while above water beaches are eroding with the disruption of natural currents” (Bagaeen, 2007, p. 187). Nakheel has responded with assertions that marine life is flourishing because of the island’s construction (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 147). They also argue that any interventions to the ecosystem by Palm Jumeirah are localized and will not affect marine life beyond the confines of the development.

The voices of the 40,000 workers that made Palm Jumeirah a reality are difficult to find. While stories from laborers specifically working on Palm Jumeirah are lacking, the experiences of these workers may be likened to those working on Dubai’s other massive construction projects. Workers, primarily from South Asian countries, live in labor camps on the outskirts of Dubai as “guest workers.” Ahmed Kanna provides a description of Sonapoor labor camp, the city’s largest. “Squat buildings mark the spot where we turned off the main, paved road and drove along unpaved roads crowded with men in the uniforms of different companies, returning from or going to their shifts. Large buses emptied their human contents and were refilled” (Kanna, 2007). The camp’s northern border overlaps with a city dump (Krane, 2009, p. 201). The camp also produces more sewage than it can process, which can sometimes lead to human waste reaching the streets from overflowing septic tanks (Krane, 2009, p. 201). Kanna describes the story of Humid, a Pakistani laborer, who paid \$2,100 for his journey to Dubai and visa. Upon arriving, the company he worked for took his passport and a \$272 deposit as insurance

that Hamid did not abandon his position. His monthly pay for 50-hour workweeks amount to around \$218, but food and cooking gas reduce his net income to \$136, which is sent to his family in Pakistan (Kanna, 2007). Other workers that Kanna encountered had similar experiences, although they acknowledge that working and living conditions can vary between the various construction companies operating in Dubai.

Relegating workers to the controlled camps outside the city emphasize the efforts made by multinational corporations, in collusion with the government of Dubai, to limit the possibilities for these camps to become spaces of engagement. Migrant workers are clearly physically apart from their families, but are also separated from each other by cultural, religious and language barriers. Wage differentiations based on country of origin further incapacitate any efforts of worker solidarity, while unionization remains out of the question under Dubai law. Friday represents the only day off for most workers, but most are unable to leave the confines of their labor camp because of financial limitations and the lack of transportation options (Krane, 2009, p. 203). Sheikh Mohammed's "open-door" policy clearly does not extend to the residents of the Sonapoor labor camp. While poor people generally have little access to political figures, the controlled "invisibility" of these migrant workers allows Dubai's government to maintain its business-friendly demeanor to the outside world.

While stories of labor resistance in Dubai are difficult to find, stories have been emerging despite the government of Dubai's tight control over media institutions. Historians Mike Davis documents one instance of resistance in March 2006 at the site of *Burj Dubai*, the World's tallest building, caught the attention of the *Observer* and *Arab News* newspapers. Davis writes:

Some 2,500 exhausted workers were waiting after the end of their shift for long-overdue buses to take them back to their dormitories in the desert, when guards began to harass them. The enraged laborers, many of them Indian Muslims, overwhelmed and beat the guards, then attacked the construction headquarters: burning company cars, ransacking offices, destroying computers, and smashing files. The following morning, the army of laborers defied police to return to the site, where they refused to work until Dubai-based Al Naboodah Laing O' Rourke raised wages and improved working conditions. Thousands of construction workers at a new airport terminal also joined the wildcat strike. (Davis, 2007, p. 67)

The lack of media coverage on this monumental display of resistance indicates the intense control the government of Dubai possesses over the way the city is portrayed to the outside world. The disruption of control over migrant laborers may have temporarily challenged the racialized spatial constructions of Dubai, but ultimately the government's influence on media sources ensured the voices of these workers did not reach a larger audience. The plight of these workers, however, has begun to garner the attention of Western institutions such as the Human Rights Watch. The recent economic crisis in Dubai has also raised the visibility of the plight endured by many migrant laborers in Dubai as some media outlets have begun to reevaluate their coverage of Dubai's enormous construction projects. The government of Dubai remains highly concerned about outside perceptions of their labor practices. Davis writes, "So much has been invested in Dubai's image as an imperturbable paradise of capital that even small disturbances can have exaggerated impacts on investors' confidence. Dubai Inc. is thus currently considering a variety of responses to worker unrest, ranging from expulsions and mass arrests to some limited franchising of collective bargaining" (Davis, 2007, p. 67).

## Marketing Palm Jumeirah

The secrecy surrounding Palm Jumeirah's initial drawings and development allowed Dubai government officials to surprise tourism executives in May 2001 with an opportunity to purchase part of a palm-shaped island that did not yet exist. In 2002, The Ruler of Dubai announced that foreigners could own land outright in Dubai. Bin Sulayem would take potential investors via speedboat to the area in the Persian Gulf where the islands were to be constructed. The English soccer team stopped in Dubai on their way to the 2002 World Cup in South Korea. David Beckham and former pop sensation Victoria Beckham were given the most expensive house on Palm Jumeirah while many other members of the English team bought properties (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 154). The ensuing media blitz ensured the island would sell-out within three days (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 154). Furthermore, the prices of property on the island were purposefully set low to ensure the island sold out as quickly as possible (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 154). The initial investors of Palm Jumeirah were made instantly wealthy by the spike in property values on the island that had yet to be built. A six-bedroom villa, which had been purchased initially for U.S. \$1.3 million, could be sold in late 2008 for \$9.5 million (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 155). Dubai, facilitated by the Palm Jumeirah project, could represent a fantasyland of capitalism where investors could instantly make millions dollars off land that had yet to be created.

The application of exchange values within Dubai seems to bring up significant contradictions. As Dubai builds newer and larger properties, the exchange value of previous projects will most likely decline. Nobody will pay more to live on a "less prestigious" Palm island development when a "better" island is built a few miles away.



The Palm projects are being built by a corporation that is entirely owned by the government of Dubai, not by competing companies. While we cannot entirely know the reasons behind creating these projects, one may surmise that they have motives behind them that are not entirely economic. One must realize that Palm Jumeirah represents something more than a business idea to the rulers of Dubai. The Palm allows Dubai to perform its futuristic vision for our built environment in a global scale while countering perceptions of Arab “backwardness” that are prevalent in the West. Dubai’s support of capitalistic development and neoliberal economic practices have allowed Western nations to view Dubai as a modern city and a bridge between the Western and the Arab worlds.

### **The Spaces of Palm Jumeirah**

Visitors to Dubai generally notice the lack of any coherent design aesthetic. Absent of a clear downtown, Dubai seems to be comprised of a continuum of gleaming sky scrappers and other relatively new buildings. Palm Jumeirah gave the government of Dubai an opportunity to reinvent a built environment through this project of offshore urbanism. The result seems fitting for Dubai, a city with little connection to its past built environments but one that uses an exoticized and invented vision of the past to market itself. The design aesthetic of Palm Jumeirah is noticeably Disney-like in character and informed by a variety of international actors. The Atlantis hotel in particular seems built to evoke a fantasy of a whimsical Arabian landscape, using the traditional Arab arches and other architectural elements in the “Arab eclectic” style. One of the architects associated with Palm Jumeirah was U.S. based Larry Ziebarth, whose clients include Disney and Sea World (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 146). The designers of Palm Jumeirah were not only architects, Many of the residential developments on Palm Jumeirah look

like an extension of the Atlantis hotel (pictured below), which lies on the farthest end of the island from shore.



Palm Jumeirah's highly controlled spaces have been likened to gated communities in other countries. Of course, Palm Jumeirah presents a unique situation in which its creator has molded the land itself in very particular ways. The palm design was meant only to be aesthetically pleasing, but to control the movement of people to and within the island. A single connection with the mainland offers a very difficult environment for any pedestrians travelling to the island. The individual fronds that comprise the island are not connected to each other except at the trunk, generally requiring one to travel much farther than the point-to-point distance of another location on the island. Given the nature of developments on the island, this probably has had little impact on the residents of Palm Jumeirah. Residents seem to generally remain in their private units while on the island as public space is clearly absent from the development. Each villa houses its own pool and

fenced-off yards. The artificial beach seems to be the one place residents may talk to one another. Convenience stores are also absent from the island as real estate values make them uneconomical as car trips into the Dubai mainland allow residents, or their domestic workers, to obtain the daily necessities.

Within the island itself, social distinctions parallel with the built environment seem prevalent. One of the fronds has the distinction of being the “party” frond while another is considered the VIP frond (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 148). One visitor expressed the following: “It seems as if the best parts are ‘gated’ and reserved for the lucky few. It is a wonderful piece of civil engineering, but I think the entrance is uninspiring and the building density is too high, which doesn’t do justice to the ‘island’ brand. As you drive in, you can’t see that you are coming to an island- a place that is supposed to be about access to the sea... The potential was there to create a slower paced and less dense oasis within a thrusting city. Dubai has a lot going for it, but if it’s to be a sustainable city where people of differing tastes put down social and economic roots, then it needs to diversify in terms of what it offers as a place to live- and I don’t mean offering towers that rotate or reach the stars, I’m talking about environments and neighborhoods” (Elsheshtawy, 2010, p. 149). The lack of community on Palm Jumeirah is apparent, but does not seem to be an unfortunate consequence of poor planning but a deliberate decision to design an individualist spatial environment in line with neoliberal thought.

### **What Palm Jumeirah Represents and Its Implications for Future Development**

Palm Jumeirah serves several roles for Dubai. It created an instantly recognizable development that has captured the world’s imagination. The unprecedented development of a palm-shaped artificial island was made only recently possible because of

globalization. The movement of cheap labor and financial capital has been facilitated by specific policies enacted by Dubai's government. Resident visas for foreigners purchasing land on Palm Jumeirah are easily accessible while migrant workers pay thousands of dollars for visa agencies to gain the right to work in Dubai. These mechanisms are spatially delineated as well from the moment immigrants enter Dubai. Dubai International Airport, a bustling site at any time of the day with the tagline "Connecting the World," offers two processing organs for people entering the UAE. The first one, designated for citizens of Gulf Cooperation Council member nations, Americans, Canadians, Europeans, and other wealthy countries, queue in an elegant atrium physically above passengers from other nations (Kanna, 2007). People from countries such as India, China, and Pakistan are required to apply for visas before they can begin their journeys to Dubai. These passengers are marked upon entering the country as the "other," from their physical entry into the country beneath immigrants from other countries to the scrutiny of their visa documentation. Upon exiting the airport, many of the South Asian immigrants are destined for the labor camps outside the city while Americans and Europeans head for hotels such as Atlantis on Palm Jumeirah.

Palm Jumeirah was not solely an economic initiative by the Government of Dubai. The pricing structure of the island that ensured initial properties sold quickly, as well as the use of celebrities to market the development, emphasize Dubai's new place as a global city. The monumentality of the island is meant to showcase that Dubai is "21<sup>st</sup> Century Arabia" and can serve as the bridge between the Arab and Western worlds. Dubai's citizens are trained to become neoliberal subjects that can transcend national and cultural barriers. An emphasis on individual achievement and pro-growth strategies are

developed and support by the government of Dubai and its subsidiary businesses like Nakheel. However, the success of Dubai has not solely been the result of entrepreneurial initiatives by its citizens and leaders but has been facilitated by easy access to cheap labor from South Asia.

The Palm Jumeirah represents just one of several island reclamation projects planned for Dubai. The World development, an artificial island chain in the shape of the continents, allows individuals to own a particular country or region of the world. These islands are located far enough offshore that they are not bound by Dubai law. These models of development are worth interrogating because they represent a global trend of privatized spaces built for elites. The World represents an expansion of the elements of offshore urbanism reached on Palm Jumeirah. Alessandro Petti describes these principles as security-isolation, extraterritoriality, island-worlds and social programming. Petti writes, “In this system of artificial islands, the characteristics of gated communities-enclosures, isolation and surveillance- find their best spatial configuration” (Petti, 2008, p. 291). These are also facets of neoliberal development where the “individual freedom” of global elite to buy these properties built has been invisibly subsidized by cheap South Asian labor. Additionally, neoliberalism must be localized in order for it to be an effective lens through which to examine specific developments. Geographer Jamie Peck writes, “We know that neoliberal globalism does not define some teleological destination point, the highest and final stage of capitalist development, just as we know – for all their incipient ‘universalism’ – that neoliberal politics will continue to take localized forms and will be associated with profoundly uneven outcomes, even as they engage transnational reform narratives, expert communities, and practices” (Peck, 2004, p. 395).

The informal meetings between Dubai's ruler and business elites that shape pro-business government policies represent the space through which neoliberal ideas emerge in Dubai that facilitate the movement of labor and capital to create projects like Palm Jumeirah. As Dubai bills itself as a manifestation of "21<sup>st</sup> Century Arabia," we must closely examine if the city's fantasy worlds represent the pinnacle of capitalist development and if they truly should represent models for future development.

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