



"Why of all cities Dubai?" On the left: The imposing skyline of the city. Below: Visitor inspect a model of the Badawi-Development, which will comprise 31 hotels after completion, among the "Asia-Asia", with 6500 hotel rooms the biggest hotel on the world.

Photos: EPA/Ferrari; Corbis/José Fuste Raga



## Full Speed in the Desert

The construction boom in the United Arab Emirates raves from one stage to another without any tempo limit. Architects and Engineers are waiting in queue for the sheikhs, in order to jump onto the realty 'express'.

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His Excellency Mohamed Ali Alabbar reaches in a good temper for the microphone. Below his feet, in front of the podium sits a whispering crowd, approximately 900 people, of them at least 890 were men. They are, Architects, Engineers, Construction Managers, and they come from England, Australia, South Africa, Spain, Russia, China and the rest of the world.

The guest list of the 8th World Congress held by the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat (CTBUH) reads as the 'Who's Who' of the international building society: Atkins, Arup, SOM, Schirmer, Terry Farrell, Make Architects and many others. They are the people actually building the towers in our landscapes, far away from Europe, in places such as China, Taiwan, Russia – and of course in the United Arab Emirates. Recently the International Herald Tribune estimated that currently 2 Billion Dollars are being transacted in the real estate market in the Arabian Gulf, with a speed unique in the history of humanity. We are currently at one of the hot spots on earth –Dubai. The congress ballroom's ceiling, 15 meters above ground, is decorated with exquisite patterns of wood and brass. Outside a desert wind blows through the full-length damask table cloths and inside the air conditioning curls the immaculate white robes of the sheikhs. He greets the prominent guests with, "It is a great honor," and then

invites all of them to be a part of Dubai's bigger vision. Others would dream too, but here in the Emirates, especially those welcome, are those who realize their dreams after waking up.

Mohamed Ali Alabbar is one of those powerful men, who can boast like this. He directs, as Chairman of Emaar, one of the biggest real estate developers on earth. In the snap of a finger he has more money than an average Austrian construction company realizes in one year.

### For the sake of everybody

The smart Emirate, with subtle features, makes no secret of the fact that he is in a privileged situation. One of the dreams, so states his Excellency, was a few years ago, to build the world's tallest building in Dubai. And now, to the delight of everybody, it is really happening in form of the Burj Dubai. The skyscraper, at least 700 meters high, called "The Burj" within the building scene should open in 2009 after nearly five years of construction. The clients, Emaar, as well as the project team at SOM remain silent about the exact height; preferring to talk about the breath taking speed with which this technical bravura has been built – and almost more amazingly, the rate at which the apartments were sold even before the building started to first take shape.

They say the tower was sold out within two days. The penthouses were available at a price around 15 Million Dollars.

The projects currently presented in Dubai, and increasingly in the rest of the United Arab Emirates are staggering. Hardly a day passes without an announcement for the next mega-project or media news on another celebrated secluded real estate deal. So much so that one can loose sight. Zaha Hadid alone has about half a dozen mega projects simmering in the Emirates.

Among them a swinging opera hall, several office towers for Dubai, as well as a gigantic cultural complex, titled Performing Arts Center, in which concrete waves flow over the coast of Abu Dhabi. Pritzker-Fellow Frank Gehry is also busy in Abu Dhabi; the proven Guggenheim-Architect is building a mega-museum for the US museum company. Of course Norman Foster is also active down there, with the world's tallest residential tower, the Index Tower, being erected in Dubai, and reportedly the first CO2 neutral city in the world in Masdar.

To name all the other developing houses, towers, complexes, city districts and centers is impossible but Rem Koolhaas should also be mentioned, having just signed a contract for a city district in Dubai in conjunction with his partner Reinier de Graaf.

As Graf talks about Dubai, he aptly sums up the well calculated illusion of the local events. In the United Arab Emirates everything stands and falls with the ruling clans. They nominate the government, and they practically own the real estate developer companies as well as the construction firms.

"Is it not the case," claims de Graaf, "that these authorities all look alike. They are essentially always the same". These circumstances eliminate all annoying permission procedures and other administrative barriers, and combined with the legions of cheap construction workers from India, Pakistan and China, creates a kind of slave caste within this brutal scenario. The result for land owners, construction companies and developers are high profit margins settled in a land where it seems that dreams can come true. The imported international 'real estate intelligentsia' acts some-

where in between, making a lot of money, since taxes don't have to be paid. Architects and engineers are rigorously tested among the area of conflict, of capricious clients and the toughest time schedule in the whole of the construction business. They say, in Dubai one builds in average twice as fast as in Europe or in the US.

"We work a minimum of 12 hours per day, 6 days per week", says a Briton, who optimizes the acoustics of exclusive hotel lobbies and the most spacious shopping malls on earth for an international company. "It's like gold fever", says a New Zealander, who creates new architectural concepts for a global hotel chain, and who settled down in Dubai four years ago. Why Dubai? Are you crazy? Why do you ask this insane question: "Anyone in their right mind, who is somewhat working in the field of architecture or for the building industry moves here and is a part of it!"

For the past 15 years Dubai has had a leading role in its region to invent itself. Every now and then one would hear of a real estate boom that, given the turbo rate of construction sites, will soon come to an end. But this arrogant western prognosis will not come true in the near future. In fact the opposite seems to be the case. Office space in Dubai is short, so much so that a potential buyer has to pay a large amount of money, only to be on the waiting list – and at best, the building at that moment only exists in form of renderings.

**"The strategy of the Emirates is obvious: They position themselves as a monarchy, a tax exile, economy hub and a consumer and tourism center in the fall of the oil era."**

consumer and tourism center in the fall of the oil era. In the calm, the saving center of an extremely crisis-

stricken region. Those who are able prefer to deposit their money here in the golden Emirates rather than in Pakistan, Iraq or Iran. Architecture is at the same time a vault and means of transportation.

Additionally, everyone who plans to establish a business in this part of the world finds the ideal base in the Emirates. "Here, everything operates over personal contacts. Those who don't meet their clients face to face have no chance," says the manager of a software company. In Dubai everything turns around money and business. Everybody pinches a bit, and those who move here never receive anything for free.

### Very dark

But flashy, outrageous Dubai quickly becomes very dark at the lower end of its scale. Behind its sparkling high-rises, hotels, and shopping scenery one will find nothing more than an unbelievable city of slaves. Frequently, imported laborers of the poorest areas on earth work themselves close to death on high-rise constructions sites in temperatures over 40 °C. Liveried Indian taxi drivers hunt 12 hours drenched in sweat to fulfill their daily kilometer contingent, because otherwise they would loose their bonus. Even if they achieve it, they only make enough money to rent a shared room with another six people. And everybody gives the same answer to the question, why they wouldn't move back to Goa, Karnataka or Kerala: because there, there is no work at all.

His Excellency Mohamed Ali Alabbar is very sorry that up to now three people died on the construction site of the Burj Dubai. He states, that they are learning from their mistakes: "We are going to improve accommodations and working conditions. Nevertheless we are still at the beginning."

