

**Under Construction: Logics of Urbanism in the Gulf Region.** Steffen Wippel, Katrin Bromber, Christian Steiner, and Birgit Krawietz (Eds). 2014. Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate. 336 pages. £75. ISBN: 9781472412881

The Gulf States have been at the centre of global urban research for quite a while now. They represent a mixture of neoliberal and idiosyncratic urbanism: a forest of skyscrapers by world-famous 'starchitects'; a booming real estate sector that is awed and envied by other global cities; and an urban governance that praises hegemonic control over urban space, albeit at the heavy price of socio-spatial segregation, widening inequality, and frightening labour and environmental conditions. Research on the Gulf States often focuses on the individual cases that are either trapped under parochial views of urban analysis, or that are selectively over-abstracting certain elements of urbanism in the Gulf and exporting these models to the world. Therefore, *Under Construction: Logics of Urbanism in the Gulf Region*, is a welcome contribution to the scholarship of the Gulf, not least because it provides a detailed picture of urban space in the Gulf through capital, art, image, and identity, with a fascinating empirical richness that is grounded in the Gulf, while linking it to the global circuits of money, policy and ideas. It is organised in four main themes of urbanism: political economy, production of images and iconic brands, art production and exhibitions, and policy diffusion. Each of these approaches the logics of urbanism from a different angle and links it to the overarching theme of the book: the ways in which the Gulf States prepare themselves for the post-oil area, by diversification of their assets, boosting real estate sector, and creating a knowledge economy.

In Chapter 1, the editors lay out the main objective of the book: to go beyond the matter-of-fact descriptions and popular praise of peculiar urbanisation in the Gulf, by exposing the urbanisation agenda and implicit ideology of the ruling elites. The city has emerged as the key site to implement such strategies and policies, a site of growth and control. But, it is also

a place of freedom, as it is a key to free circulation of ideas and movements. Thus, the right to the city becomes another theme signposted by the editors, though overlooked in many chapters. Moreover, the editors provide a brief outline of each theme, with accompanying critical comments. Each section begins with one or two theoretical introductory chapters and goes on the details in following chapters.

The first section looks at the politics and economy of infrastructure and architecture in the Gulf States. It follows the money – i.e. how these lavish urban developments are financially supported – and actor associated with it. Chapter 2 sets up the theoretical framework, shedding light on the construction phenomenon in the Gulf States, coupling the analysis of hyperrealities of Baudrillard with Bourdieu's symbolic capital. Chapter 3 follows the same fashion, using historical institutionalist approach to the state and endogenous growth theories to address the region's urban development. The following chapters in the section give more in-depth analyses of exemplar projects that hinge on the overarching theme of the section as well as idiosyncratic differences of the cities they were built in. The empirical richness in these chapters shows how power and capital play out in Abu Dhabi, Oman, and Qatar. The authors would have benefited from a brief discussion on the sustainability of the current mode of urban development, given how devastating it was during the 2007/8 financial crisis. However, given the limited space available for each chapter, what the section misses in macro- it compensates for in micro-perspectives, with rich empirical data that provides a detailed look at urban governance, construction, and real estate in the Gulf.

The following section covers the Gulf States' construction of idiosyncratic identity through images and iconic brands. Chapter 7 lays out the framework that the section will follow: widening gap between the real and the virtual, diminishing role of architectural site, and flat architectural representation in the Gulf States. This chapter also follows some problems raised in the previous section, e.g. the unsustainability of the Dubai model, but from a different perspective. Dubai cannot keep its promises – the virtual representation is ever closer to perfection, as the built environment lags behind (p. 91). The site means nothing,

boundaries become blurred and economic interests are prioritised. It would have been good, however, to also mention how the Dubai example is different from other world cities in its hyperrealities. The following chapters in the section give concrete examples of how this image production occur and implemented on the ground, with tourism and port development in Chapter 8, sports as branding in Chapter 9, use of iconic animals in landscape as branding in Chapter 10, and looking at 'the other' (i.e. German-English guidebooks to the Gulf) as branding in Chapter 11.

The third section discusses the production of art through land developments in the Gulf. Branches of famous Western museums are the case studies in various states and cities of the region. The discussions are rich and fascinating, and cover a diverse set of examples, not least building museums as rent-extraction accumulation strategies, importing museums as branding, and investing in museums as diversification towards knowledge economy. Examples of aerial photographs to enrich the cases help the reader to visualise the site. Another noteworthy discussion, however brief, is on work force and employment (p. 193 and 223), which is often overlooked in previous sections. However, empirical richness in the section often overshadows critical reasoning, leading a somewhat descriptive portrayal of the cases.

The last section on the book focuses on policy mobility and transfer of the Gulf model(s) to other cities. The literature of South-to-South policy exchange has expanded in recent years and this section offers a detailed empirical look at its development in Egypt (Chapter 18), Morocco and Tunisia (Chapter 19), Damascus (Chapter 20), and Khartoum and Nouakchott (Chapter 21). Moreover, the section goes beyond the procedures and implementation of policy mobility and discusses the reasons of why and how it happened in certain context. For example, Chapter 19 discusses how Egypt has been using the real estate sector as a magnet for foreign currency, particularly petro-dollars from the Gulf, so as to fill its dollar reserve. However, it is also noted that the Global South is seeking an alternative mode of

development to that of Western cities but copying Dubai or the Gulf experience is in itself another one-size-fits-all approach that is doomed to fail.

In conclusion, the book provides thick descriptions, borrowed from cultural anthropology, that aim at understanding what is really going on in the Gulf with special reference to, first, political economy, image and identity production, and, second, preparations for a post-oil era, real estate market, and power relations. Though the latter is not as pronounced as the former because of the lack of the discussion on labour, climate change, and sustainable development, the empirical richness in the former provides an excellent gateway, due to its accessibility and balanced approach towards theory and practice, to anyone who is interested in the urban developments in the Gulf.

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