"The Raha beach waterfront development in Abu Dhabi"

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Compared with Dubai, waterfront developments in Abu Dhabi have emerged only recently, in line with the latter emirate's slower pace of infrastructural and urbanistic expansion.

At the present moment there are three such projects under way in Abu Dhabi i.e. Al Reem island, owned by the local developers Sorouh, Tamouh and Reem; Saadiyat island developed by TDIC (Tourism Development and Investment Company), and Raha Beach by Aldar.[1] It has been announced that TDIC is also going to build a waterfront city in al Bateen area, that will be known as Al Bateen Wharf.[2] All of them are part of Abu Dhabi 2030 vision, a urban planning to adapt to growing demographic rates and to "cement its place as the capital city of the UAE federation."[3]

This paper focuses on Al Raha Beach waterfront for two reasons: the project's branding as the "ultimate waterfront city" and its developers' commitment to "building the nation".

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[1] Jones Lang Lasalle, *On.point Abu Dhabi – Abu Dhabi city profile, April 2009*, 6, online at http://www.joneslanglasalle.com/MediaResources/EU/Marketing/MENA/JLLMENA_Abu% 20Dhabi%20City%20Profile_2010.pdf.

[2] See, "TDIC to redevelop Abu Dhabi's Al Bateen waterfront", http://www.ameinfo.com/141161.html#story accessed on April, 29th 2010.

[3] See "Building the capital of the future", http://www.ameinfo.com/186746.html accessed on April, 29 2010.

Al Raha beach waterfront: facts

Al Raha beach waterfront is being developed by ALDAR properties, the same company that has built the Formula 1 race track in Yas island. Aldar is the most important property development company in the emirate of Abu Dhabi, where it has played a pioneering role similar to that of Emaar Properties in Dubai.[4] Aldar's leadership is expressed in the company's vision on "establishing Abu Dhabi as the United Arab Emirates' most dynamic, forward thinking real state market."[5] Aldar is synonymous with the establishment[6] and has a general commitment to "building the nation."[7]

According to Aldar properties, Al Raha beach waterfront will become the "ultimate water city", a "great Arabian water city" and "one of the greatest waterfront cities in the world". Aldar's claim seems to apply primarily to the 500 hectares (6'8 million square meters) of surface that will be occupied by the development which, after completion, will extend eleven kilometers to the north of the Abu Dhabi to Dubai highway at Al Raha Beach, allowing about 120.000 people to live in it. Yet, the promoters declare that the project "is not only about vastness." They stress the city's "unique location" along a "sheltered coastline, islands, bays and marinas shaped by inlets and canals and linked by bridges." "Sheltered coastline" refers to the development's overlooking a creek (*khur*) which flows between the continent and four adjacent islands, i.e. Sas an-Nakhl, As Samaliya, Al Qurayya and Yas. This means hindrance of open sea views but also protection against the high seas, a phenomenon that has not been unseen in the recent history of Abu Dhabi.[8]

Apart from housing an increasing number of residents, Al Raha Beach waterfront has also been designed to meet business, tourism, educational and

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[4] See Ch. M. Davidson, *Abu Dhabi: oil and beyond*, London, Hurst & Company, 2009, 88.
[5]   "AlRahabeach.Abu   Dhabi,"   Brochure,   5,   online   at http://www.aldar.com/downloads/brochure_Al_Raha_beach_en.pdf.   Also   see http://www.aldar.com/al_raha_beach_video.en.
[6] See Davidson, *Abu Dhabi: oil and beyond*, 88.
[7] "AlRahabeach.Abu Dhabi," Brochure, 5. In the Arabic version of the project: "nabni li-l-watan", see online http://www.aldar.com/downloads/Brochure_Al_Raha_Beach_ar.pdf, page 24.
[8] See Mohammed al-Fahim, *From rags to riches. A story of Abu Dhabi*, Dubai, Makarem G Trading and Real Estate LLC Abu Dhabi, 2007, 21-2, reporting on a violent storm that hit Abu Dhabi in 1959, "washing the sea over the village of Abu Dhabi which was not protected by the Corniche as it is today."

recreational purposes,[9] and ultimately, "to enhace Abu Dhabi's natural wealth of water and beach frontage."[10] The city will comprise eleven precincts of individual style and uses (I quote them following the order in which they are presented in the brochure): Al Zeina, Khor al raha, Al Bandar, Al Seef, Al Rumayla, Al Zahiyya, Al Lissaily, Al Shaleela, Al Razeen and Al Thurayya. All these precints will be built around a central business district called Al Dana (or the Pearl), the business hub of Al Raha beach. It will be home to four iconic or "signature" buildings designed by reknowned architectural companies. Among them will stand the Abu Dhabi World Trade Center, Aldar's new headquarters, and the Strata tower. According to Al Raha Beach waterfront developers, Al Dana will become "one of the most prestigious addresses in the world in which to have business premises".

The precints will be interconnected through a net of water ways in which transportation will be possible, among other means, by fast catamarans, ferries and water taxis. They will serve all parts of Abu Dhabi island as well as outlying islands such as Saadiyat, and also the international airport, providing Abu Dhabi with an alternative form of urban transport. Rail and road public transport will provide access to Al Raha beach from down town Abu Dhabi and the greater Abu Dhabi network. The development is connected to the Abu Dhabi-Dubai highway and a new highway, already in operation, links it to both Yas and Saadiyat islands.[11] All these values are expected to add to the tourism offer of a capital suffering from chronic traffic congestion. Hence Al Raha beach being branded as "the new gateway to Abu Dhabi".

A most interesting feature of the project is Aldar's linking its commitment to 'building the nation' with that of environmental sustainability.[12] This latter requirement is expected to be met with the procurement of the GREEN building (or LEED) certification for everybuilding. Additionally, an Eco-Centre will be built in Al Zahiyya precint in which rare plants, birds and butterflies will be displayed and visitors will be provided with a nature observatory similar to the Eden project in

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[9] "AlRahabeach.Abu Dhabi," Brochure, 7-9.

[10] http://www.skyscrapercity.com/archive/index.php/t-178634.html, comment posted on Febrary 10th 2005 by "Krazy."

[11] See "Aldar reports significant progress in Al Raha Beach infrastructure", Emirates News Agencies, WAM, posted on April, 20 2010 in http://www.uaeinteract.com/news/rss-news.asp?ID=40667, accessed on June, 16 2010.

[12] Aldar's "commitment to 'building the nation' goes beyond constructing buildings. It creates attractive, sustainable and environmentally-friendly communities." See "AlRahabeach.Abu Dhabi," Brochure, 5.

Cornwall, England. Indeed, in all the published designs of the project, ultravanguardist architecture is combined with fountains and a profusion of plants, flowers and trees which, together with see water and the pools, create a verdant and caribbean effect.

Noteworthy is also the stress on walking and cycling as means to move within the city's precints through a safe pedestrian network which, added to public transportation by water, rail and road, will "reduce car dependency, increase opportunities for social exchange and link all facilities to adjoining areas".

Significantly, Al Raha beach waterfront is the first urban development project in Abu Dhabi in which non nationals will be able to buy real state property.[13]

According to an Aldar executive, the first three precints were sold out already in 2007, along with Al Dana, the most expensive area, which was sold in May 2008 at Abu Dhabi Cityscape property exhibition. The success experienced by the project that far was explained because of the views to the marina and the see, and because of Abu Dhabi's chronic shortage of housing. After some delays,[14] the first phase of workings has been completed this summer[15] and the final phase is expected to be ready by 2019. Despite the initial success, in May 2009, Aldar announced its intentions to review several projects inside the development due to "changes in market demands". The revisions will affect Al Seef community and parts of Al Dana financial district.[16]

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[13] "AlRahabeach.Abu Dhabi," Brochure, 7.

[14] See Nathalie Gilliet, "Al Raha Beach delivery coming in 2009," *The National*, online at http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080723/BUSINESS/474441735, accessed on May, 4 2010.

[15] Flats in construction or already finished at Al Raha beach can now be found in the secondary market.

[16] See Roxane McMeeken, "Aldar properties rethinks £13bn Al Raha Beach scheme", http://www.building.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=3141313&encCode=7166312881BC994078708JTBS737226611, accessed on May, 6 2010. In fact, page 3 of the Arabic version of the brochure mentions only eight precincts. See

Raha Beach waterfront: a hyperreality?

In view of Abu Dhabi's traditional architecture[17] and the emirate's harsh environmental conditions,[18] the idea of an ultra-modern water city evoking Venice with its channels and its water transportation, is at first sight hyperrealistic. In fact, the project can be best analyzed as an architectural hyperreality and fits into definitions of that concept put forward by postmodern philosophers and social scientists, although it does not conform entirely to any approach in particular. To analyze Al Raha beach waterfront I have thus resorted to postmodern theories applied to the study of modern architecture and consumer society, but neither exclusively nor inconditionally.[19]

As in the case of other architectural hyperrealities,[20] the designs of Al Raha Beach waterfront convey a series of sensations (e.g. freshness, greenness, comfort, prosperity and fun) meant to make people long to buy assets in the project. Whether or not the assumption that such an experience is detached from any real emotional engagement[21] can also be applied to its developers and to its prospective Emirati residents and visitors is a less certain question, however.[22] Be that as it may, Al Raha

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http://www.aldar.com/downloads/Brochure_Al_Raha_Beach_ar.pdf, accessed on June, 27 2010.

[17] By "traditional" architecture in Abu Dhabi I mean adobe and break buildings such as the forts of Al Ayn, the Maqta' fort at the entrance of Abu Dhabi island and, down town, the Qasr al-husn. The interested reader may consult Salma S. Damluji (ed.), *The Architecture of the United Arab Emirates*, Reading, U.K., Ithaca Press, 2006.

[18] Mainly those of the desert, with extremely high temperatures from June to September combined with high humidity levels by the coast. See F. Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*, Dubai-Abu Dhabi-London, Motivate Publishing, 2004, 4-14.

[19] "Postmodernism should not represent a creed or club to which you either do or do not belong, but rather a resource which consumer researchers tap into as a means of sharpening their insights as to what is to be a consumer." See Ch. Goulding, "Issues in representing the postmodern consumer,", *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 6/3 (2003,) 152-59 (online at www.emeraldinsight.com/1352-2752.htm) at 156, quoting S. Miles, "A pluralistic seduction: postmodernism at the crossroads," *Consumption, Culture and Markets*, Vol. 3, 145-63 at 146-47: "Miles points to the seductive nature of postmodern rethoric which can result in an over exaggeration of social change and lifestyles, which say more about the state of academia than the realities of consumption experiences... Ultimately, postmodernism may actually enslave rather than free the researcher, if the cultural patterns it seeks to describe are actually embroiled in the critical discourse of academic theory rather than the cultural realities of every day lived experience" (Goulding, ibid.)

[20] See U. Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, New York, Hancourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986, 44; R. Smith & V. Bugni, "Architectural sociology and post-modern architectural forms," *Connections*, August 2002, 2.

[21] Ibid.

[22] See, for example, page 3 of the Arabic version of Raha beach waterfront's brochure, online at http://www.aldar.com/downloads/Brochure_Al_Raha_Beach_ar.pdf, accessed on June, 27

Beach's hyperreal appearance endorses Umberto Eco's remark that touristic spaces are becoming the priviledged scenario of hyperrealities.[23] In the particular case of the Gulf area, these scenarios concentrate precisely in waterfront developments and iconic buildings[24] -Al Raha beach will combine both into its different precints- and are now extending to themed parks.

Certainly, only the sand, the water, the plants,[25] the developers and a part of the future residents belong to the local environment. Al Raha Beach waterfront results unreal and is lacking in precedent in the urban landscape of Abu Dhabi. Yet, the physical conditions of Abu Dhabi's coast, surrounded by some 200 islands[26] of which Abu Dhabi city is the biggest one, lends itself to island cruising and to eco-tourism.[27] And if we move to the neighbouring emirate, we find plenty of preexisting models. In fact, the urban development of Dubai city has become a model case for the study of hyperreal cities in itself, its influence on Al Raha beach being quite obvious both in the overall conception of the project and in some of its individual characteristics (e.g. the man made islands that will be built in some precints.) Even Dubai creek (*Khur Dubai*) crowded by a constant flow of dhow ships that provide pedestrians with cheap, fast and picturesque transportation between both banks, appears to have actually inspired in Al Raha beach what one might at first sight attribute to Venice. Competition runs in both directions however:[28] in January 2008 the Dubai based

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2010.: *huna ... ghasa l-ajdad bahth^an al-la'ali'. Al-yawm ha huwa shati' al-raha...ka-jawhara min naw`akhar.*

[23] *Travels in hyperreality*.

[24] See Ch. Steiner, "From Heritage to Hyperreality? Prospects for Tourism Development in the Middle East between Petra and the Palm," paper presented at the conference "Traditions and Transformations: Tourism, Heritage and Cultural Change in the Middle East and North Africa Region", Amman, Jordan, 4 – 7 April 2009, online draft at http://www.staff.uni-mainz.de/steinec/Publikationen/Steiner_Heritage%2520to%2520Hyperreality_2009_WP.pdf, 9.

[25] Although brought from somewhere else.

[26] This condition is mentioned as an asset by both the Tourism Authorities of the Emirate and by Aldar. See the Arabic version of the brochure, online at http://www.aldar.com/downloads/Brochure_Al_Raha_Beach_ar.pdf, 4.

[27] The most remarkable example in this regard is the Sir Bani Yas island located in the South western waters of the Emirate, in front of the Jebel Dana port.

[28] Rather than being based on mere divisiveness, according to Martin Hvidt, competition in and among government-controlled entities of Abu Dhabi and Dubai is induced by both emirates' authorities through conscious policies of duplication. See Hvidt, "The Dubai model: an outline of key development-process elements in Dubai," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 41 (2009), 397-418, at 410. Also see Ch. Davidson, "The Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai: contrasting roles in the international system," *Asian Affairs*, XXXVIII/1 (2007), 33-48, at 43.

Nakheel developer announced the Waterfront Dubai project, branding it as the largest waterfront in the world and whose designs are remarkably similar to those of Al Raha beach. Also significant was the 'Business Bay' project launched by Dubai Holdings's in 2007 and described as "a gigantic artificial canal connecting the creek to a multitude of emerging skyscrapers complete with Venetian-style waterways just behind Shaykh Zayed Road and close to Dubai International Financial Center."[29]

Among the explicit sources of inspiration New York and London figure prominently,[30] but also San Francisco, and Rome. Elements evoking Islamic architecture such as Souqs, Arabesque terraces, traditional style houses with *majlis,* central courtyards and wind towers (*barajil*)[31] connected "through an intricate network of walkways and bridges" will be present in the different precints with the aim of giving them "a clean contemporary touch and luxurious finish".

Al Raha beach waterfront may thus be characterized as a free and eclectic recreation of already existing models,[32] rather than as a simulation in the sense of Baudrillard, since according to him, simulations are "perfect representations of entities which do not exist" and which lack an origin or reality; they imply feigning "to have what one hasn't" and involve "a liquidation of all referentials."[33]

As I have pointed out above, Al Raha beach waterfront is not completely lacking in physical and social embeddedness.[34] On the other hand, the developers do

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[29] See Davidson, "The Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai," 41. Aldar's Al Raha beach waterfront project was announced on the local press on May 2008, although it had already been presented at City Scape 2007 exhibition. See, for example "Al-dar tasta`rid mashru` Shati' al-raha," *Al-Ittihad*, May, 12 2008, online at http://www.alittihad.ae/details.php?id=21165&y=2008, accessed on June, 22 2010. In this announcement in an Arabic local newspaper, no mention is made to Al Raha beach waterfront being the "ultimate waterfront city". In the Arabic version of the brochure, it is instead presented as the ultimate address in the most beautiful city in the Gulf, i.e. Abu Dhabi (*al-`unwan al-jadid li-ajmal mudun al-khalij*). See http://www.aldar.com/downloads/Brochure_Al_Raha_Beach_ar.pdf, 3.

[30] http://www.skyscrapercity.com/archive/index.php/t-178634.html, comment posted on Febrary, 10 2005 by "Krazy."

[31] This latter type of construction was in its turn imported to Dubai by Iranian merchants who started to settle in the city from the end of the 19th century onwards. See Ch. Davidson, "The emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai," 34.

[32] On hyperrealities that consist on a "synthesis of combinatory models" or on "arbitrary and eclectic combinations and permutations of signs... that do not refer any more to signified," i.e. third order simulacra, see J. Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations" in M. Poster (ed.), *Jean Baudrillard. Selected writings*, Stanford, University Press, 1988, 166-84, at 167, and *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1994, 1.

[33] See J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 2 and "Simulacra and Simulations," 167.

[34] Cfr. Ch. Steiner, "From Heritage to Hyperreality?", 7: "Examples of hyperreal places in the sense of Eco or in the sense of first and second order simulacra," i.e. imitations rather than

not pretend to build accurate imitations but evocations of their model's flair and charm in order to arouse consummers' desire to buy assets in the waterfront.[35] Yet, the way in which the developers of Al Raha beach handle their stated models[36] add credit to Baudrillard's assertion that from the late twentieth century onwards, signs have become separated from their referents.[37] Also, the developers' particular selection and combination of referents implies the capacity to constitute a self referential system of signs typical of third order simulacra-hyperrealities.[38] Be that as it may, both the model, i.e. Dubai, and its recreation, i.e. Al Raha beach waterfront, yield the same result: A new hyperreal Arab city, "clean, calculable and reliable,"[39] completely commodified and ready for tourism,[40] but also for residence and business.

Unlike simulations, Aldar's schemes do not reflect absences such as that of an indigenous cultural tradition[41] but rather the existence of contradictions and fragmentation within this tradition,[42] and more importantly, a series of goals and

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simulations, "are increasing in the Arab World... However, while an increasing number of resort complexes, shopping malls, leisure and fun-oriented projects, iconic buildings, and waterfront projects are erected in the Arab world, it seems as though they are increasingly lacking spatial, historical, and social embeddedness, Rather, architectural and interior design styles are eclectically combined and cited."

[35] "In a commodity the relation of word, image or meaning and referent is broken and restructured so that its force is directed, not to the referent of use value or utility, but to desire." See M. Poster, "Introduction" to M. Poster (ed.), *Jean Baudrillard. Selected writings*, 1-9 at 1, commenting on Baudrillard's progressive withdrawal from Marxism reflected in his books *The system of Objects* published in 1968 and *Consumer society* (1970).

[36] In the particular case of elements featuring traditional Islamic architecture, it has been pointed out that their eclectic combination yields "an orientalisation of the orient." See A. Al-Hamarneh, Orientalizing the Orient – Postmodern Geographies of Tourism in the Arab World. Paper presented at Second World Congress of Middle Eastern Studies (WOCMES-2), 11-17 June 2006, Amman, Jordan, quoted by Ch. Steiner, "From Heritage to Hyperreality?," 8.

[37] See M. Poster, "Introduction" to *Jean Baudrillard. Selected writings*, 4, commenting on Baudrillard's *The Mirror of Production* (1973). Also see the remarks of Ch. Steiner concerning architectural hyperrealities in the Arab world in "From Heritage to Hyperreality?", 7.

[38] See J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 2.

[39] I quote Ch. Steiner, "From Heritage to Hyperreality," 8. I do without the last adjective in Ch. Steiner's sentence ("streamlined") since Abu Dhabi down town is indeed quite streamlined, in comparison with other Middle Eastern cities.

[40] Cfr. Steiner, *ibid.*

[41] In his *Travels in Hyperreality*, U. Eco observes that hyperreal spaces like Las Vegas or Disneyland reflect the lack of an indigenous cultural tradition in the United States.

[42] See R. Smith & V. Bugni, "Architectural sociology and post-modern architectural forms," *Connections*, August 2002, 1. Fragmentation of the self and identity confusion are not exclusive of Arab Muslims or of Muslims in general but a feature that, according to extreme postmodernist thinkers, "characterises the postmodern condition and the object of postmodernism, i.e. the postmodern consumer... Consumption ... becomes a means through

aspirations. Among these latter I would like to stress an emotional factor like the hope of exorcising the extreme difficulties of past times and of overcoming the constraints of a harsh physical environment through strong will and modern technology.

Beyond the facts: Abu Dhabi's goals and aspirations

Projects like Al Raha beach have historical, political and social meanings that some times are explicit and other times are less apparent to the observer's eye. Promoting the image of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi internationally, exploiting the emirate's touristic potentials and at the same time, "building the nation", are among the evident and declared meanings of Al Raha beach waterfront development.

Relevant to other less evident aspects of the project is the concept of symbolic capital. "Symbolic capital" is an expression coined by Pierre Bourdieu to refer to "the sum of cultural and social recognition, which individuals and groups accumulate through the exploitation of social symbolisms of distinction, and as the means of cultural and social recognition. The accumulation of symbolic capital is a necessary means to succeed in the (global) competition for recognition and prestige... in order to accumulate symbolic capital, one must spend economic resources."[43] The hyperrealisation of tourism spaces can thus be understood as an exchange of economic and symbolic capitals.[44] Although the financial returns of initial investments may not always be direct, they may pay back in high international recognition and in an increasing demand with tourists to visit them. Perseverance in such expensive and often risky developments is further explained by symbolic capital's capacity to legitimise and enhance the political position of its owners, which in the Gulf countries use to be identical to the elites in power.[45] Not only touristic spaces but postmodern architecture in general has become a priviledged scenario for

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which individuals can creatively construct and express the multitude of identities that are open to them." See Ch. Goulding, "Issues in representing the postmodern consumer," 153, 154. Online at www.emeraldinsight.com/1352-2752.htm.

[43] See Ch. Steiner, "From Heritage to Hyperreality?," 9, quoting P. Bordieu, *Entwurf einer Theorie der Praxis auf der ethnologischen Grundlage der kabylischen Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1979, 344 ff., 349 and 350.

[44] See Steiner, "From Heritage to Hyperreality?," 9.

[45] Ibid, 9-10.

the exhibition of symbolic capital,[46] and has thus gained strategic value to enhance the image of a city internationally and to express identity.[47] Yet, compared to schemes like the Formula 1 race track in Yas Island and the branches of the Guggenheim and the Louvre museums that will be erected in Saadiyat island, the relevance of Al Raha beach waterfront for a discussion of acquisition of symbolic capital in exchange of international recognition and political legitimation, is very limited. For this reason, in order to frame the symbolic meaning of Al Raha beach waterfront I am going to concentrate rather in Abu Dhabi's initiatives to diversify its economy and the emirate's commitment to become the leading force in the federation expressed in the slogan of "building the nation".

Characterizations stressing that, in contrast to Dubai, Abu Dhabi "continues to exude a certain sleepiness" have become obsolete.[48] Abu Dhabi is by far the wealthiest emirate in the UAE, commanding 90% of the country's total reserves in oil and gas. These latter make up a share of the 10% of the world's oil reserves, which puts the UAE above Kuwait and on an equal foot with Iraq.[49]

On the grounds of such good prospects of financial security, Abu Dhabi has afforded to assume a less risky development path than Dubai,[50] so far focused on oil-based overseas investments to which to resort in the event of fall in oil prices, and on oil-dependent industrialization.[51] However, in the last five years Abu Dhabi has started to extend its economy to the real state and the tourism sectors in order to attract visitors and individual foreign investors; hence the possibility to buy houses and apartments for the first time offered in Al Raha beach waterfront to non nationals. Further, Abu Dhabi has taken a substantial step in the engagement of international partners. To this latter initiative belong the aforementioned construction of branches of the Guggenheim and the Louvre museums in Saadiyat island as well as the cooperation with prestige Academic institutions like the Paris Sorbonne and the New

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[46] Ibid., 9, quoting J. Becker, "Stadt und Postmoderne. Zur Diskussion einer postmodernen Stadttheorie," *Raumforschung und Raumordnung*, 55 (4-5), 358-66, at 363.

[47] See M. Hvidt, "The Dubai model," 407, quoting Anna Klingmann, *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2007, 4.

[48] See Ch. Davidson, "The Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai," 33. This approach has been overcome in Davidson's recent monography *Abu Dhabi: oil and beyond.*

[49] See Davidson, "The Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai," 37.

[50] On Dubai's economic development see M. Hvidt, "The Dubai model".

[51] See Davidson, "The Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai," 38-9.

York Universities. This expansion is being supported by sporting, entertainment and cultural events.

Wealth has and continues to be central to struck political balances within the UAE federation. So far, the development of the four smallest emirates (Fujairah, Ra's al-Khaymah, Ajman and Umm al-Qaiwain), has mostly depended on funds alloted by Abu Dhabi. More recently, Abu Dhabi has baled out some development projects in Dubai with the result that the global financial crisis on the one hand and Abu Dhabi's touristic expansion on the other hand are shifting international attention from Dubai to Abu Dhabi. Be that as it may, the latter is now in need to struck new political balances and to ground its leadership within the UAE on a more diversified economic development path. This need is explained by several factors.

Environmental sustainability figures very prominently among the main obstacles Dubai's economy will have to face in the future.[52] Abu Dhabi authorities are well aware of this problem and of the impact that such issues as the protection of the environment, recycling, the rational use of energy and the development of clean alternative ones generate in the public opinion.[53] This awareness is quite visible in the schemes of Al Raha beach waterfront, although it is not new. Already in the times of the late Shaykh Zayed, a number of projects were carried out to support nature and the environment such as the planting of trees and the allocation of a series of reserved areas to protect endangered species. These policies have been taken on by his successor, Shaykh Khalifa b. Zayed.[54] At the present moment, several initiatives and public campaigns are being carried out to convince Abu Dhabians of the need to spare water and electricity, to recycle[55] and to keep the environment clean. The jewel of the crown is the Abu Dhabi Future Energy Company, better known as the Masdar initiative, established with the aim of "advancing the development, commercialisation and deployment of renewable energy solutions and clean technologies." The company is building Masdar city, "the world's first carbon-neutral zero waste city" that will host the headquarters of Irena, the International Renewable Energy Agency.[56] Some have seen a paradox in Abu Dhabi's selection as the first headquarters of this

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[52] See M. Hvidt, "The Dubai model", 407-10.

[53] See Davidson, *Abu Dhabi: Oil and beyond*, 137-38.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Some recycling points are already operating in Abu Dhabi downtown as well as in other emirates like Sharjah.

[56] See www.masdarcity.ae. Accessed on May, 13 2010.

international organism given that the UAE are considered the world's most environmentally unsustainable society[57] whereas the decision has been celebrated by a coalition of African and Arab nations on the grounds that it is a success for the developing world.[58] Within this initiative, a Spanish-French consortium made of Abengoa Solar and Total has been awarded a contract to build a 300 hectares solar plant named Shams 1 in Abu Dhabi's desert.[59]

On the other hand, there is a shortage in natural gas, the preffered fuel to produce electricity[60] in an emirate whose development has generated a huge increase in power demand. So far, Abu Dhabi has rested on natural gas imported from Qatar, but there is no security that this latter is being able to respond to Abu Dhabi's future increase in power consumption.[61] Electricity must be then produced by burning oil or other liquids, as other countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are doing already. Abu Dhabi is in fact exploring the construction of nuclear plants on its soil and a nuclear power plant in Braqa, near the Saudi border at Ruwais, has already been contracted with two Korean companies: Korea Electric Corporation and Hyundai Engineering and Construction.[62] Yet Abu Dhabi's intentions go far beyond of accomodating the domestic demand. Rather, its authorities aim at turning the emirate "into a global energy center that would create high-quality jobs even after its oil runs out."[63]

Nationals' increasing unemployment rates are indeed a problem in need of urgent solution in Abu Dhabi, specially now that Dubai is less likely to fill this gap, as it has done in the past. Increased unemployment rates are prompting a debate on "national identity" all over the country,[64] and putting in question a system in which

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[57] See Hvidt, "The Dubai model, " 411.

[58] See http://www.worldwatch.org/node/6179, accessed on May, 13 2010.

[59] See http://www.europapress.es/economia/noticia-economia-abengoa-asocia-total-construir-abu-dhabi-planta-solar-500-millones-inversion-20100609135714.html, accessed on September, 22 2010.

[60] See S. Reed, "Abu Dhabi probes nuclear power," online at http://www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/jan2009/gb20090114_965802.htm, accessed on May, 13 2010.

[61] See Reed, "Abu Dhabi probes nuclear power".

[62] See "ENEC (Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation) - Nuclear Power Plant", online at http://www.zawya.com/projects/project.cfm/pid220307020544/ENEC%20-%20Nuclear%20Power%20Plant?cc accessed on September, 8 2010.

[63] See Reed, "Abu Dhabi probes nuclear power"

[64] See http://www.zawya.com/marketing.cfm?zp&p=/countries/ae/macrowatch.cfm?eiusection=Demographic%20Profile&cc, accessed on May, 16 2010; S. Islam, "Hard times drive expats back to their parents," online at http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100220/PERSONALFINANCE/702

nationals and foreign residents are in total disproportion, the former's making up only 20% of the total population. This system has mainly drawn on contracting the workforce abroad, e.g. "construction workers and domestic servants from the Indian subcontinent; nurses, doctors and teachers from Egypt and Syria... and highly educated persons with qualifications in technical or economic fields from Europe and the United States"[65] while nationals are employed mainly in the public sector.

In sum, the diversification initiative put in motion by Abu Dhabi and in which it is possible to insert hyperrealisations of touristic spaces like Al Raha beach waterfront is intended to attract international investment and reflects Abu Dhabi's aspirations to become a global energy center, a tourist destination and an economic and cultural international hub. Yet this may result a double-edged strategy in view of nationals' concern –already expressed regarding increasing foreign ownership in Dubai-[66] that activities that were exclusive of the nationals are now in the hands of foreigners and that the rulers have come now to depend on them. It is the need to address such concerns and Aldar's relationship with Abu Dhabi's leadership what appears to explain the company's slogan to 'build the nation'.

199916/1056/rss, accessed on May, 16 2010; R. Mously, "The Emirati dilemma," online at http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/education/the-emirati-dilemma-1.624128, accessed on May, 16 2010; E. Mohammed, "The debate on UAE national identity," online http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/general/the-debate-on-uae-national-identity-1.106921, accessed on May, 16 2010.

[65] See Hvidt, "The Dubai model," 403.
[66] See Davidson, "The Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai," 44.