

# COMMENT

## WHILE DUBAI'S EXPANSION BEGINS TO SLOW, A VIBRANT STREET LIFE AND SOPHISTICATED TRANSPORT SYSTEM IS CREATING A REAL CITY AT LAST, SAYS HERBERT WRIGHT

**It is time to reassess the extreme clichés** about Dubai. To many, it is a fabulous place, fast-forwarding into the future with stunning, drop-dead architecture and stupefying engineering driven by a can-do mentality that casually obliterates Guinness records. Alternatively, it is the quintessential dystopia sprung from unfettered development, environmentally and socially unsustainable, and an architectural zoo in a playground for the super-rich.

Think again. Yes, the rich are luxuriating in the fantasy hotels and the McVillas on the Palm Jumeirah, but on the ground, ordinary people are starting to make the city buzz. Streets are coming alive in cityscapes that weren't rendered in advance. Dubai is actually beginning to feel like a real city.

The heart of a functioning metropolis is a vibrant downtown. Ten years ago, Dubai's was the old business district of Dehra around Dubai Creek, but things move quickly here. For the next decade, super-developer Emaar is building a district called Downtown. Its first elements opened at the end of 2008 – WS Atkins' The Address, a stylish hotel and condo tower, and the Dubai Mall, with two and a half times the retail space of London's Westfield. Behind them is Adrian Smith's Burj Dubai, the world's tallest structure, looking curiously Flash Gordon as its silvery curves glint in the sun. This Downtown will certainly dazzle, yet real downtowns are rarely the result of planning. They are haphazard places.

Indeed, an impromptu downtown lies along a stretch of Dubai's central artery, Sheikh Zayed Road (SZR), between the iconic Emirates Towers and the Dubai Mall. This is not the most conducive environment for city life – SZR is a 10-lane freeway where the minimum speed is 60kph. Yet here, cafes and restaurants are full, busy supermarkets trade late into the night, and the sidewalks bustle. All this takes place at the bottom of a canyon of skyscrapers that back on to what are still mainly car parks and vacant lots. Elsewhere in Dubai, high-rises are spaced to better behold them, but along SZR, they stand shoulder-to-shoulder, as in New York or Chicago. Sure enough, the street life, the crazy whizz of traffic and the linear massing of random buildings make walking along SZR as exhilarating as Fifth Avenue or Michigan Avenue.

Crossing SZR, however, is another matter. There are only two pedestrian crossings in this 2km strip. Like Los Angeles, Dubai has been built for the motor, but that is about to change. In September, Dubai's largely Japanese-designed and built Metro

will open. Most of the Red Line's 50km length runs on concrete flyovers beside SZR, and every station will connect both sides by bridge. Overnight, SZR will transform from a people-barrier to an axis of public connectivity. A second line opens in 2010, and Metro traffic could rise to 355m per year. London's tube carries more than a billion, but that's after 145 years' development. Furthermore, a 7km Palm Jumeirah monorail, and, in 2011, the 14km Al Sufouh Tram, will seamlessly connect to the Metro. In 2008, commuting meant driving an SUV or air-conditioned limo, or for the army of Asian construction workers, a battered minibus from a labour compound. By 2011, it will mean riding one of the best public transport systems.

Dubai's transformation coincides with the rise of a resident middle-class for whom the day is more than shopping and sunbaths, and buying milk means going to a corner shop rather than a mega-mall. The middle ground between low-pay workers and the elite of high-flying executives, holiday-home owners and the super-rich is beginning to fill. Projects like Zaha Hadid's Opera House even promise culture.

Of course, property prices are now falling. Outlandish plans such as the world's largest airport, funfair and golfing city, and no less than 2km-plus skyscrapers to dwarf the Burj Dubai, may well get stuck in a project pipeline no longer lubricated by credit. Emaar's rival hyper-developer, Nakheel, recently announced its plans for Universe Islands, which seem cosmically over-confident. Yet Nakheel has already dredged two more Palms, which dwarf the Palm Jumeirah – each could host more than a million residents.

In 2008, Pritzker Prize-winner Thom Mayne warned that Dubai was heading towards 'ecological disaster,' in part because of the lack of joined-up planning. But there is a hand guiding Dubai's development – curiously, its leader, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum. Credit him for the explosion of Sim City-on-acid development, but also initiatives like the public transport net. And the architects who've had the biggest impact on Dubai, WS Atkins and Adrian Smith, are both pacesetters in green building technology rather than followers. Sustainability is on the agenda – the United Arab Emirates has committed to the Kyoto Protocol (and legislated against the extreme conditions of construction workers). As Dubai ripens into a world city under the sort of sunshine the planet Mercury experiences, there are good signs on the drawing board as well as the street ■



**Herbert Wright** is a freelance writer and the author of *London High and Skyscrapers*