Hidden Realities: The Politics of Aesthetics

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Hidden Realities

The Politics of Aesthetics

ad hoc / agency / context / emancipation / equality / estrangement / exclusion / excess / icons / incomplete / parafiction / tension / zones of exception and inclusion
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Politics: As defined by contemporary French philosopher Jacques Ranciere, politics is the inherently disruptive attempt by those who are victimized or excluded by inequitarian social orders to assert themselves as equals of those with privilege and power.

Aesthetics: While the term is associated with a range of definitions, this thesis uses Ranciere’s understanding of aesthetics as that which constitutes a sensible experience. Aesthetics is not about art or beauty, but rather the experience of a common world and who is able to have that experience.

Politics = Aesthetics
(a) Politics is aesthetic as it is concerned with the “sensible” distribution that constitutes social hierarchies.
(b) Aesthetics is political in the sense that historically important conceptions of the nature of art and of the role of the artist determine the “distributions of the sensible” in the artistic domain and lend insight into the distributions that categorize larger society.

(Jacques Ranciere, The Politics of Aesthetics)

Distribution of the sensible: In the text Politics of Aesthetics, Ranciere coins the term “distribution of the sensible” and defines it as a composition of a priori laws which condition what is possible to see, hear, say, think, do, and make. The distribution of the sensible is the condition of possibility for perception, thought, and activity - what can possibly be apprehended by the senses. The sensible is partitioned into various regimes and, therefore, delimits forms of inclusion and exclusion in a community. The distribution of the sensible is the framework for Ranciere’s definition of politics.

(Jacques Ranciere, The Politics of Aesthetics)

This thesis uses preexisting local phenomena in Dubai to construct a near-future scenario where political systems are exploited to demonstrate the politics of aesthetics and their ability to alter the context and its existing socio-economic infrastructure. By imposing unfamiliar forms and systems, familiar aesthetics are recast to redistribute the sensible and create a new reality out of underlying social, economic, and cultural power structures. As a result, form, composition, and aesthetics can begin to operate politically to uncover hidden realities and project alternative futures.
On Aesthetics

Appearing across multiple disciplines since its introduction in the eighteenth century, the term "aesthetics" has adopted a definition that is highly variable depending on the discursive context. While contemporary interpretations of the term are largely concerned with the theory or appreciation of art (as in academia) or with ideals of visual beauty (as in popular culture), the origin of aesthetics as a concept precedes the term’s official introduction and can be traced back to Aristotle’s description of sensing or experiencing forms that produce our definition of reality. Aesthetics, then, fundamentally dwells on the relationship that humanity shares with the forms of its reality, suggesting that reality is itself predicated on familiarity, individual experience, and contextual engagement. Immanuel Kant’s definition of aesthetics as “the ability to form judgments regarding sensory qualities with special attention to subjective taste and disinterested pleasure” adds to this fundamental understanding by suggesting that an aesthetic experience constitutes qualitative consideration and assessment.

The aestheticism movement of the nineteenth century, of which Oxford Don, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde were key figures, maintained that aesthetic discourse is protected from ethical, economic, and political engagement and is immune to the “pollution of capitalism,” lending to the cultural significance of aesthetics. Building on this notion, twentieth-century intellectuals such as Lyotard, Lacan, and Derrida concluded that


aesthetic concerns obscured underlying power structures and the truth of reality in their superficial and autonomous pursuit of beauty. Twentieth-century figures, therefore, surmised that aesthetics were culpable for restricting political access to an exclusive group of intellectuals and intellectually engaged artists, prompting artistic practices to develop and maintain contra-aesthetic inclinations to favor social and political engagement. In his introduction to the book titled *Aesthetics Equals Politics*, Mark Foster Gage attributes the current controversial status of aesthetic discourse to such twentieth-century perceptions, and posits that contemporary political and social inequalities reflect the emerging divide between those with aesthetic and political access and those without. Gage’s position is augmented by Jacques Ranciere, who observes in his book *Disagreement* that political engagement is contingent on the possession of logos, or the capacity to make arguments, thereby creating distance between those who are considered to possess this capacity (political subjects) and those who lack it. In Ranciere’s work, politics is aesthetic as it is concerned with social hierarchies that result from sensory capacities distributed as a result of qualitative information received from the world. For Ranciere, this manner in which qualitative information is distributed across the senses is the definition of aesthetics. Although aesthetics operates independently from ethics and epistemology and solely through tensions between the sensory and the intelligible to spark a redistribution of the sensible, these redistributions may eventually lead to theoretical arguments or the development of ethical stances. As Michael Young highlights in his essay titled “The Aesthetics of Abstraction,” these are “aspects of the political that emerge from the aesthetic.”

If issues of political inaccessibility are linked to aesthetic distances, there is, as Gage argues, a demand for new creative practices that move away from “singularly observed and rote-based critical theory strategies,” which seek to increase knowledge by exposing the underlying power relations beneath appearances, to collectively assessed aesthetic ones, conveyed through more physical and visual modes which “aim to destabilize and redistribute sensible information.” Thus, it is well within the scope of architecture, which is inherently concerned with form, space, composition, materials, and representation/image, to consider political and ontological problems as aspects of aesthetic experience.

We situate ourselves in this discourse by recognizing that aesthetics is fundamentally a manner of engaging with qualitative information and the capacity to sense and evaluate these qualities to shape familiarity and reality.

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On Autocratic Neoliberalism

Characterized by a unique system of governance emerging from a conflicting political agenda of autocratic neoliberalism, the city of Dubai offers a lens to demonstrate the politics of aesthetics and their ability to alter a context and its existing infrastructure.

Much like its regional counterparts, Dubai maintains an authoritarian system of rule that has been firmly established, and continually reinforced, throughout its history. However, in recent years, the pure autocracy that was previously synonymous with the state's identity has yielded to highly contagious neoliberal influences that control other ‘global’ cities. In Dubai, the agendas of autocratic neoliberalism extend far beyond politics, encroaching upon the responsibilities of architecture and urban planning by reordering the city into discrete zones. In one such zone of the city, the notorious ‘labor camp,’ low-wage migrant construction workers are contained and systematically excluded from the widely circulated global image of the city.

To demonstrate the inherently aesthetic nature of politics, Jacques Ranciere asks, “who has the capacity to be a political subject and what form of sensible experience produces or forbids that capacity?” Contextualizing this aesthetic question in an autocratic neoliberal state like Dubai reveals how political power is concentrated at the hands of the ruling class and global corporations - a small, exclusive group of elite entities self-anointed as figures of authority best equipped to advance the state’s neoliberal aspirations.

At the other end of the spectrum, low-wage migrant construction workers represent another political extreme, embodying the class of laborers characterized by their political inaccessibility in Plato’s ideal society. The workers’ supposed lack of acumen to engage in discussion and make arguments leads to their marginalization and exclusion from the political operations of the city. In Disagreement, Ranciere considers the “sensory capacity”12 that factors into political hierarchies and concludes that the marginalized must produce “sensible evidence”13 of their capabilities to be perceived as equals by those who enjoy political access. In this thesis, the politics of autocratic neoliberalism are studied through the sub-plots of the exclusion of low-wage migrant construction workers, the ethical and jurisdictional issues of the free-trade enclave, and the culture of material excess. The intersection of these hidden narratives presents an opportunity to explore the potential for aesthetics, form, and composition to operate politically.

To create a new reality, the free-trade zone and its benefits are first returned to the host city. Incomplete infrastructures, by-products of the culture of material excess in a politically and economically volatile context, serve as hosts for the new zone. As the zone mutates, it breeds with the prevalent urban form - the capitalist vertical icon - and is selectively exposed to become more transparent in its operation. The displacement of the zone creates a unique jurisdictional condition that subverts existing authoritarian laws and recasts the aesthetics of autocratic neoliberalism. This enables informal economies operated by low-wage migrant construction workers to be relocated to the vertical zone, creating new social flows and material processes. The re-imagined zone relies on the aesthetics of the ad hoc to generate an anti icon rife with misaligned seams of tension, contradicting the skyline of generic, global icons. By engaging the relationship between abstraction and realism as aesthetic qualities, the proposed reality redistributes the senses to affirm equality for low-wage migrant construction workers.

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12 Sensory capacity refers to the perceived ability of an individual or group to experience and participate in a certain scenario. Jacques Ranciere, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

13 Sensible evidence is a demonstration of sensory capacity (see above). Ibid.
"Unpaid or extremely low wages, several years of indebtedness to recruitment agencies, the withholding of employees’ passports, and hazardous working conditions." 14

Low-wage migrant construction workers are merely perceived as commodities - lacking rights and stripped of their identities, with their bodies reduced to matter, asserting their exclusion from society. Strict autocratic laws dictate the positioning of labor accommodation, and thus, the position of low-wage migrant construction workers relative to the city.

"Inexpensive labor is imported from Asia and elsewhere, like machinery or other equipment."  

"The economic collapse made visible a mirage built by migrant workers whose rights were ignored, where infrastructure is inadequate, and whose laws are often intolerant and draconian." 

"[Migrant workers'] work no longer required, they are now expected to disappear." 

"Privatization of the labor market also means that the state is less inclined to ensure that provisions for migrant rights and welfare are made. Without regulation to ensure standard hours of work, employees are easily exploited."
This issue of exclusion and exploitation is well researched and well documented in the media and, to quell these accusations, the state government has focused on “the physical state of housing and its expected amenities to improve bodily safety, nourishment, health, and hygiene, which provide more tangible and visible ways to demonstrate improvements rather than trying to reform policies and governance.” 19

19 Todd Reisz, “Along Sound Lines” Perspecta Urban Divides 50 (September 2017): 133.

“By focusing on the conditions of labor camps, government policy can implement architectural and urban strategies that appear to address labor unrest and the global media it attracts. Unlike housing, other workers’ grievances, such as the elusive structure of hiring and pay, do not come with easy images of decrepitude.”
Position of Low-Wage Migrant Workers

More than just a place of accommodation, labor camps have become key sites in the state’s efforts to reconcile its fraught and contradictory autocratic and neoliberal agendas and in workers’ own strategies to contest the unjust industrial and spatial relations governing their everyday lives. 20

The satellite image of Dubai is indicative of these political tensions in the city; a clear divide emerges between the autocratic governance of the city, the neoliberal aspirations prompting entry into the global market, and the labor camps which reconcile these agendas. This tension between autocratic rule and neoliberal aspirations of marketized urbanization is captured in the state’s simultaneous disregard for workers’ rights and inclination to invest in their corporeal welfare.

Position of Low-Wage Migrant Workers

Exclusion / Exploitation / Hostility / Lack of Identity / Network of Mistreatment

Planning Standards for Labor Accommodation

Site should be at a distance of at least five kilometers from family residences.

Site should be far from major tourist roads or arteries.

Site should be far from existing investment compounds, whether of tourist or commercial nature.

Site should preferably be close to industrial areas or areas presenting job opportunities with a buffer zone in between. 21

Beyond such relegation to the margins of the city, the position of low-wage migrant construction workers in society is further undermined and reinforced through deliberate efforts by the government to create strategic structures of exclusion in public infrastructure and everyday life. In a chapter titled “Divided City” from Migrant Dubai, Laavanya Kathiravelu highlights low-wage migrant workers’ reliance on public transportation for mobility and reveals “their inability to access parts of the city that are not linked to [such] networks.” 22 Workers are further restricted by the debt they owe to illegal recruitment agencies in exchange for elusive hiring and relocation services, preventing them from breaking out of blatant systems of inequality and discrimination to become part of society. Kathiravelu observes that “within the train system, there is a hierarchy of ticket pricing,” 23 suggesting that public transportation is yet another economic strategy designed to effectively segregate and classify low-wage migrant workers from middle-class commuters. In this classist system of governance, painstaking measures are taken to ensure that the body of the “other is kept invisible and separate.” 24 Spatially, these ideas are manifested through the palpable differences between “elite and middle-class leisure spaces such as shopping malls and hotels [which are] privatized, restricted and sheltered” 25 and the “outdoor public spaces - associated with heat, sand, and dirt” 26 that low-wage migrant workers seeking leisure zones are encouraged to use. While public spaces across the city are not explicit in their desire to keep these workers out, the glass-enclosed and privately-owned spaces of shopping malls and hotels are rife with political connotations resulting from the class struggle between these workers and an upper-class society that frequently looks down on them. On the contrary, open areas like sidewalks, parking lots in working-class neighborhoods, and greened islands between highways offer freedom from these rigid and discriminatory social structures. Low-wage migrant workers are symbols of what the emirate does not want to stand for - poverty and inability to participate as consumers in the neoliberal economy that the state aspires to.

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid, 166.
26 Ibid.
Position of Low-Wage Migrant Workers

Exclusion / Exploitation / Hostility / Lack of Identity / Network of Mistreatment

The segregationist socio-spatial strategies outlined previously are judiciously adopted by the state government to exclude low-wage workers from urban life. Mapping low-wage workers' movement across the city reveals a network of mistreatment which begins as they enter the city, already indebted to recruiters, and follow a direct yet removed path into labor camps pushed to the peripheries, where the heavily manufactured global image of the city can afford to disintegrate without detection. Following their entry into the city, low-wage workers are subject to exclusionary practices and discouraged from interacting with the city beyond services deemed essential to their survival, such as money exchange and transfer centers to repay hefty debts. Thus, a vicious cycle begins.
Position of Low-Wage Migrant Workers

Exclusion / Exploitation / Hostility / Lack of Identity / Network of Mistreatment
Position of Low-Wage Migrant Workers

Exclusion / Exploitation / Hostility / Lack of Identity / Network of Mistreatment

The space of the labor camp is strategically bound by highways where fleeting experiences discourage any contemplation on the neighborhoods nested within. Severed from the city, save for the bus route that transports workers back and forth, the labor camp doubles as a backstage to the city where the commodified low-wage labor force coexists with infrastructure critical to the success of the neoliberal state such as industries, cemeteries, landfills, and abandoned car impounds. The space of the labor camp is a messy yard simultaneously occupied by newly manufactured products, material excesses, and waste from the city.

Existing in a realm that eludes the visibility and accessibility promised by Google Street View, the labor camp functions as a mini-city that is policed by the employer. Over time, the space of the labor camp has evolved to become a site of political confinement and social quarantine, where informal services and economies centered on survival, such as money exchange centers and prohibited telecommunications services, continue to flourish.
While the autocratic state explicitly forbids expressions of political resistance, quasi-autocratic Dubai strategically allows strikes and demonstrations to transpire discretely and discreetly in the confines of isolated labor camps at the margins of the city. As geographer Michelle Buckley observes in her essay titled "Locating Neoliberalism in Dubai: Migrant Workers and Class Struggle in the Autocratic City," the state’s systematic efforts to segregate working class labor from the rest of the city have resulted in spatial confinement becoming a tool for political containment. Urban space is, therefore, activated as a key player in shaping labor politics.27

In addition to these political exemptions, certain services offered to the low-wage migrant population are overlooked by the state. As Laavanya Kathiravelu notes in Migrant Dubai, “Medical attention, food, and, in a limited capacity, consular assistance are provided informally to low-wage migrant workers in local parks, on pavements outside labor camps, and anywhere else that these workers may congregate.”28

The zone of the labor camp thus functions as a space outside the formal, neoliberal economy of Dubai.29 To sustain its neoliberal ambition, the state is compelled to appease low-wage migrant workers, to some extent, by remaining negligent to informal and almost-illegal activities conducted within labor camps and granting minor exemptions from generally authoritarian and unbending state laws. Relegated to the liminal spaces of the city and the law, these activities are tolerated and ignored by the state.30
Temporary, informal markets emerge in the liminal spaces of Dubai’s labor camps. Low-wage migrant vendors frequently re-purpose available materials to demarcate their zone of economic activity - piles of fruit, rows of vegetables, and stacks of fish are sold from makeshift market stalls operating from the backs of trucks, under umbrellas, and on old carpets, bedsheets, and tables, offering subsidized everyday commodities along with certain illegal goods and services for the survival of low-wage migrant workers. Run by low-wage workers to supplement their low incomes, these marketplaces offer essential services such as haircuts and tailoring, conducted in open areas, as well as illegal recreational services such as gambling. Illegal vendors frequent legitimate marketplaces in the city to obtain their stock. Sustained by the network of mistreatment, these informal economies are symbolic of the exclusion of low-wage construction workers from the amenities of the city.

The existence of such a thriving, informal network within the confines of the labor camp reveals the system of autocratic neoliberalism that factors into the governance of Dubai’s low-wage migrant population. The state continues to turn a blind eye toward these economies, intervening only when such activities harm the corporeal welfare of the low-wage migrant worker, who is perceived as a commodity to advance the state’s neoliberal image. The relegation of these activities, encounters, and events to the liminal spaces of the city means that they also exist in the liminal spaces of the law. As Khalifa Al Romaithi, the municipality’s head of health and sanitation justifies, “We don’t want to fine [low-wage workers] 500 dirhams for each offense, as they generally only earn 1,000 dirhams. We consider them to be new to the country and its culture and want to help them.”

“While promoted as relaxed, open, and free from inefficient state bureaucracy, the politics written into the zone’s spaces and activities often diverges from the declared intent. It is usually an isomorphic exurban enclave that, exempt from law, can easily banish the circumstances and protections common in richer forms of urbanity.”

Governed by a unique set of laws operating outside the autocratic regime, the free trade zone is a prominent neoliberal symbol. As an economic, infrastructural enclave, the free trade zone offers lucrative incentives to eliminate traditional trade barriers and facilitate entry into the global market.

Politics of the Zone

The economic zone offers a selection of incentives to promote foreign investment. These include:

- 100% foreign ownership
- Unrestricted access
- No currency restrictions
- Low land rates
- Complete exemptions from taxes, customs, and commercial levies
- 100% repatriation of capital and profit
- Benefits of being considered “offshore”
- Access to ports and a large labor force 33

Conceived of to enable states to trade at the global scale, the zone is compelled, by design, to disregard domestic laws and “inefficient” state bureaucracy to succeed in its quest to provide uninhibited economic growth. As Keller Easterling reveals in Extrastatecraft, through its rejection of state governance, “[the zone] has become an agent in the growth of extrastate urban space (space beyond the reach of local jurisdiction),” 34 allowing its host to navigate and profit from shadow economies. As the zone grows, it engulfs more of the host state to become what Easterling refers to as a “large-scale spatial organization that demands an administrative authority comparable to that of the state.” 35 Known as the zone state authority, this entity is an extrastate player with the power to negotiate with foreign businesses and governments. With the power bestowed upon it, the zone authority belongs to a network of international, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental players and enjoys the ability to grant an exception from any law and implement selective regulations. Despite its apparent apoliticism and lawlessness, the zone is actually “a powerful political pawn that trades state bureaucracy for more complex layers of extrastate governance, market manipulation, and regulation.” 36


36 Ibid, 27.
Although the zone’s operations elude local standards and regulations, its physical space is contained within state boundaries, resulting in sites of multiple, overlapping, or nested forms of sovereignty where domestic and transnational jurisdictions collide. Characterized as “a temporary phenomenon to launch economies,” the zone’s earliest iterations were expected to dissolve into the economies of their host cities and migrate to a new host where they would contribute to the revival of new economies.

Devoid of the contradiction and diversity that characterize richer forms of urbanity, the zone remains a closed-loop, mutating by breeding with other increasingly prevalent urban enclave forms such as office parks, container ports, offshore financial areas, tourist compounds, knowledge villages, IT campuses, and even museums and universities, to become a world contagion.\(^3\) Rather than merging with the general business and industrial climate of the host city, the zone became a "persistent yet mutable instrument, transforming as it absorbed more of the general economy within its boundaries."\(^4\)

Using each other as proxy, state and non-state actors manipulate and decouple from laws to manufacture the most advantageous political or economic climate. As a result, the zone, in some cases, has evolved into an entire city or city-state, becoming the seat of governance from which it is selectively exempt.\(^5\) In other cases, it has multiplied, operating as a mini-city or acting as a doppelganger of the host state.
and contradiction are the hallmark of more familiar forms of urbicity. In its sweatshops and dormitories it often remains a clandestine site of labor abuse.

For all of its efforts to be apolitical, the zone is often a powerful political pawn. While extolled as an instrument of economic liberalisation, it trades state bureaucracy for even more complex layers of extrastate governance, market manipulation, and regulation. For all these intentions to be a tool of economic rationalisation, it is often a perfect crucible of irrationality and fantasy. And while as spatial software, the zone is relatively dumb—the urban equivalent of MS-DOS—it has quickly spread around the world. Yet, for all these reasons, the zone is ripe for manipulation, and its popularity makes it a potential multiplier or carrier of alternative technologies, urbanities, and politics.

The Zone is Ancient and New

The zone is heir to the mystique of ancient free ports, pirate enclaves, and other entrepôts of maritime trade. The Roman port of Delos in Greece is frequently cited as the primordial moment of the free port. The Mediterranean fostered free ports for trade along Italian, Phoenician, Armenian, and Muslim trade routes. From the thirteenth to the seventeenth century in the Baltic and the North Sea, the Hanseatic League established a network of ‘free cities.’ Fiercely independent, the Hansa traders created a quasi-monastic society, living and dying together in their trading halls and factories where, in foreign cities, they were also sometimes confined. Hansa cities like Hamburg and Bremen traded with London, Lübeck, Rostock, Gdańsk, Königsberg, Brügge, Köln, and Novgorod. In the Mediterranean, Marseille,


The Zone is a City

The zone, in its next incarnations, began to call itself a “city”—an enthusiastic expression of advancement since its origins in warehousing and shipping. Some nations used EPZs as a means of announcing their entry into a global market and their availability as contractors of outsourcing and offshoring. Countless zones were called “Cyber cities,” “technocities,” or “logistics cities,” where “city” might describe a small office park anchored by one or two buildings. Nevertheless, Malaysia’s Multimedia Super Corridor as well as China’s SEZs were beginning to deliver an entire skyline of buildings. While banishing many of the circumstantial frictions of urbicity, the zone transformed itself into a model for the metropolis that welcomes every conceivable residential, business, or cultural program.
Characteristics of the Zone
Evolution / History / Relevance / Violence

48 EXTRASTATECRAFT

The KAEC plans also envisage a manufacturing zone called "Plastics Valley" as a means to take advantage of auxiliary petrochemical resources as well as an international container seaport with logistics, warehousing, and transshipment facilities. As the city continues to grow over the next fifteen years, it hopes to incorporate resort functions, e-governance, home automation, and a connection on the Mecca-Medina rail line—part of a larger network of high-speed rail planned for Saudi Arabia. Incentives for foreign investment include ownership of property, low-cost financing, exemptions from import duties, no personal income tax, and a minimal 10 percent corporate income tax.69

Digital fly-throughs render KAEC as a golden city with both modern skyscrapers and references to traditional Islamic buildings—all serving as a monument to the state and its "wise leadership."66

The Zone is a Double

Shenzhen is a double of Hong Kong. Pudong doubles Shanghai. CIDCO, the City and Industrial Development Company of Maharashtra, operating under the motto "We make cities," is making Navi Mumbai the double of Mumbai.46 Not only has the zone become a city, but major cities and even national capitals are now engineering their own zone dopplegangers—their own non-national territories in which to create newer, cleaner alter-egos, free of any incumbent bureaucracy. The zone embodies what political scientist Stephen D. Krasner 59 See kingabdullahliv.com and "Saudi Arabia to Allow Foreign Ownership in KAEC," at arabianbusiness.com.
60 CIDCO is to deliver infrastructure that is the zone standard: an airport, mass rapid transit, railway stations, industrial compounds, a harbor, a central park, a golf course, and residential areas. A similar company, SKII Infrastructure Ltd., will contract for some portion of the infrastructure as a private-sector endeavor. Navi Mumbai will be equipped with infrastructural and legal environments like those in Shenzhen and Pudong—city-states with not only commercial areas but also a full array of programs. See cldco.maharashtra.gov.in and skilgroup.co.in.
61 "Giant Indoor Park Opened for Kazakh President's Birthday" at telegraph.co.uk.
62 The state of a exception, a legal concept deployed by the German jurist Carl Schmitt, granted the Third Reich an exemption from law during a moment of war or emergency—essential legalizing the lawlessness of the concentration camps and other atrocities. Giorgio Agamben's recent analysis considers the state of exception in light of Roman law and as a spatial entity—the camp. He suggests that the idea of the camp is even naturalized in ordinary space—the "zones distinctive of our airports and certain outskirts of our cities." Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereignty, Power and Bare Life (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 175.

also recognized as necessary accoutrements of the new zone.74 In 2010, three days of celebrations—coinciding with Nizarbayev's seventieth birthday—marked the opening of the indoor park with its monorail, tropical zone, wave machine, and beach. A performance by Andrea Bocelli, together with a circus and other spectacles, entertained the world leaders who gathered for the event.75

The Zone Prefers Non-State Violence

Administered by an authority independent from the state and able to grant a raft of legal exemptions, the zone would appear to be a quintessential example of a state of exception.76 The zone aspires to lawlessness, but it is also distinct from the legal tradition of exception that applies to a nation. Zones thrust just as most maritime city-states have cheated for centuries, and in cross-national or cross-border growth zones products may circulate between a constellation of zones taking advantage of different laws, wage scales, or factory quotas.77 Zones preside over a mongrel form of exception that is more resilient and potentially more insidious. The matrix of exceptions—between state and non-state jurisdictions—is harder to trace than the kin(s) of exception associated with a single emergency of the state. While seeking out relaxed, tax free, extrastate spaces, businesses may also lobby for legislation in their home state, in order to promote, for instance, favorable trade agreements.

74 See astana.gov.kz/ru/.
75 "Giant Indoor Park Opened for Kazakh President's Birthday" at telegraph.co.uk.
76 The state of a exception, a legal concept deployed by the German jurist Carl Schmitt, granted the Third Reich an exemption from law during a moment of war or emergency—essential legalizing the lawlessness of the concentration camps and other atrocities. Giorgio Agamben's recent analysis considers the state of exception in light of Roman law and as a spatial entity—the camp. He suggests that the idea of the camp is even naturalized in ordinary space—the "zones distinctive of our airports and certain outskirts of our cities." Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereignty, Power and Bare Life (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 175.
Characteristics of the Zone
Evolution / History / Relevance / Violence

Rendering of residential villas, King Abdullah Economic City

In the zone, war is bad for business. The zone harbors not the violence of nations but the violence camouflaged by nations, and while some zones advertise their presence, others remain hidden. From its inception, the most overt and routine forms of violence have been aimed at workers. The zone has been a site for the fabled “3D” jobs (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning), as well as one of the chief instruments in the so-called race to the bottom—the competition between countries to provide the cheapest labor and the most deregulated conditions at the expense of workers and the environment. The 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in the Dhaka EPZ in Bangladesh revealed a list of retailers like Wal-Mart that had located production in Bangladesh because the wages were at the lowest end of the scale. Every player in that disaster had cheated the rules or chiselled the budgets to deliver inexpensive labor. 76


Promotional video, New City Lazika, Georgia

bureaucracy may be merely replaced with a more complex extra-state administration. The zone offers a clean, relaxed, air-conditioned, infrastructure-rich urbanism that is more familiar to the world than the context of its host country. Yet the masquerade of freedom and openness turns very easily to evasion, closure, and quarantine. Zones foster self-reflexive networks, and the same subset of corporations stick together in legal habitats that can be recreated anywhere in the world. The optimized, RFID-tagged zone promotes fluid, information rich, and error free environments. Yet because it only receives or recycles compatible information in closed loop, there is also the risk of what the industry calls “control error”—a potentially fatal denial of information to maintain the status quo. 112

112 For a discussion of “special stupidity” see Easterling, Enduring Innocence, 195.
Aesthetics of the Zone
Delirious / Fantastical / Global / Innovation / Repetition

“Promotional videos for the free zone invariably follow the same template. A zoom from outer space locates a spot on the globe. Graphics indicating flight times to major cities argue that this spot, wherever it is, is the center of all global activity. ...Stirring music, appropriate for an adventure film or a western, is ethnically inflected to suit the culture at hand. A deep movie trailer voice describes the requisite infrastructure. As the zoom continues, clouds part to reveal multiple digital sun flares and a sparkling new skyscraper metropolis.” 41

Designed to entice the audience into believing that fantastical projections of delirious buildings shaped like diamonds, dolphins, and crystals are a plausible version of reality, zone imagery is a powerful tool that relies heavily on a set of strategies to sustain the illusion it presents.

To understand the zone's ambitions, it is imperative that imagery associated with the zone is isolated and assessed qualitatively. Easterling's analysis of media advertising the zone criticizes the crude and tacky quality of production and simplistic representation to insinuate that the current aesthetics of the zone obscure the violence and complexity characteristic of the form. An evaluation of zone imagery that seeks to understand how the medium "destabilizes the familiar to redistribute the sensible"42 momentarily disregards the lack of sophistication and dishonesty to consider the aspirations of and effects produced by the image itself. Michael Young's work on estrangement and the aesthetics of abstraction is appropriated to zone imagery to engage with different representations of the zone and judge qualities made available by the image. In this consideration, a level of sophistication and tact that is frequently eclipsed by the amusement and disbelief evoked by the strange projections begins to materialize.

The local context is substituted by a ceaseless and expansive landscape that protects and separates the zone from other urban forms. The limited information presented in the image renders the zone as an enclave that is liberated from the constraints of its host. In its isolated depiction of the zone, the image erases the messy politics of the zone which result from jurisdictional overlaps and complex affiliations. Rather than dismissing these qualities as being the result of an unrefined production effort, it is crucial to recognize their effects; the abstraction and transformation of the context intensifies and lengthens the observer's attention and triggers aesthetic engagement.

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The dense cluster of generic high-rises that defines the skyline is occasionally interrupted by a preposterous, **extravagant icon** that fractures the monotony of the zone. The placement of this iconic object in the context of the zone estranges the observer’s relationship with the more normative forms that create the background and disrupts the temporal flows, thus altering the manner in which one experiences the reality proposed by the zone. Michael Young postulates that abstraction in aesthetics requires a background to suggest that the estrangement comes after something, but does not demand that the background show sequence or process.43 For zone imagery, which strives to impart optimism through plausibly futuristic realities, this tactic produces a **defamiliarization** that is innovative and engaging, while preventing the observer from contemplating the systems and processes that enable the development of such a flamboyant context. Jacques Ranciere notes that aesthetics can alter what a community believes can be said; this is how it begins to redistribute the senses.44 In the case of zone imagery, the presence of the incredulous icon alters what the observer believes **can possibly exist** within the space of the zone by **disturbing the assumptions of the background** to upend the very appearance of reality.
As Easterling observes in *Extrastatecraft*, the isomorphic zone rejects most of the circumstance and contradiction frequently associated with more familiar forms of urbanity. Advertised as an instrument of economic liberalism, the zone attempts to appear apolitical to advance its agendas. The image of the zone relies on the identical application of abstract materials on every form associated with the zone to create a unified space devoid of violence, conflict, disagreement, and inequality. The zone is calibrated through this abstraction of material and appearance. In the immaterial but immaculately polished multiplicity of surfaces, the absence of any cultural identity associated with the city surrounding the zone is inevitably captured.

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The reality in these zone images is stretched, often distorted, until doubts are raised regarding the facticity that the mediations propose. On some level, this aesthetic engagement is comparable to parafictional art, which produces and manages plausibility. Carrie Lambert-Beatty defines parafiction as a “situation in which fiction is presented or encountered as fact.”

Figure 1: The illusion of reality presented in the images is betrayed by a revelation made apparent only upon closer inspection. The implausible dimensions of the floorplates, or their absence entirely, coupled with the flatness of the image become indicative of the extent to which reality is distorted.

Figure 2: Reality is presented as a three-dimensional collage with elements seamlessly stitched together, re-contextualized and made cohesive in tone and aesthetics, lending a sense of credibility to the scenario.

Figure 3: The techniques of production of the zone imagery in this figure parallels those used in constructing parafictional imagery, where elements are reconstructed using different mediums and presented in a manner similar to the original.

While parafictional art is critical of its effects, zone imagery aspires to be realistic without any critical representational agenda. In doing so, zone imagery remains oblivious of its potential for engagement. The sweeping views of zone buildings in the promotional clips could become an invitation for doubt, prompting a closer inspection.

Aesthetics of the Zone

Doubt / Estrangement / Parafiction / Plausibility / Realism

Make-Believe:
Parafiction and Plausibility

CARRIE LAMBERT-BEATTY

There is no steady, unswerving progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one passes through infinity’s convulsive spills, keyboard’s thoughtless plash, subliminary, doubt (the common doors), then depletion, then disintegrate, weighing at last in manhood’s pondering regime of if? But once again through, we incur the round again, and we infants, boys, real men, and if intern-ally. Where lies the final battle, whereas we abandon no more?

—Herman Melville

Istanbul, 2005

When the artist Michael Blum arrived in Istanbul to prepare for that city’s Ninth International Biennial, he discovered that the apartment building that had been home to the early-twentieth-century novelist, translator, communist, and feminist Fatma Belkhat was going to be converted to apartments. A remarkable, if little-known historical figure, Belkhat (1886–1955) was a Turkish Jew who enjoyed a long friendship—some say a romance—with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic. The two met in 1905, in the leafy atmosphere of the Zence Birdunım, Blum’s project was very much of its own moment. Under cover of the highly conventional visual lan-
guage of the home museum, Blum was able to address two publics, and two political situations, at once. For the local, Turkish audience, the frank discussion of Mustafa Kemal’s bachelor affair with the peasant woman, and his influence on her reforms, served as a critical intervention in the official biographies of the leader that continue to saturate public life in Turkey. The exposure of a previously suppressed history stoked a crisis of state’s privilege for society (most importantly, its continuing denial of the Armenian genocide). Meanwhile, for the large contingent of international visitors brought to Istanbul by the Biennial in 2005—a moment when Turkey’s potential membership in the European Union was being hotly debated—the life story of this secular, cosmopolitan, international, and progressive woman, with her famous husband and her few lovers in


2. Blum received a master’s degree from the University of Paris Faculté des Sciences, prior to attending l’École Nationale de la Photographie in Aix. Born in Jerusalem, he is currently based in Vienna.
French, can into swoopscreeps about Turkey as backwards, older, and “bizarre” (perhaps reminding them, for instance, that Turkish women had the right to vote earlier than their sisters in France). A Tribute to Safiye Behar, them, was both historical and political (and a suggestion that the former is inevitable the latter as well). But it was also something else again. For, arguably, the most substantial thing about the life of Safiye Behar is that Michael Blum made it up.

To some viewers, the fictionality of the installation’s central figure was betrayed by details like the imperfectly penciled cover of the book of Nazim Hikmet’s poetry on which Behar was credited as translator, or the coincidence that her face, blurred, blocked, or remote, could never quite be made out in any of the group photographs on display. There is also a sense of evasiveness in the video, and a touch of dark humor, as when Safiye’s grandmother describes the death of her immediately family in a freak accident in 1966—a convenient tragedy for Blum, whose research might otherwise have gone on forever (and a personally coincidental one, since that is also the year of her own birth). But though subtle clues were planned, the display was meant to be convincing. While several writers on the exhibition chose to reveal the fiction, some otherwise astute critics seemed to accept the exhibition’s claims, finding Safiye Behar a fascinating topic but the artwork itself disingenuous. Turkish press reaction varied according to the media outlet. The progressive flashed ran a supportive interview with the “American historian” about Safiye and her importance to Turkish history, and only at the very end of the long piece revealed that she was a fiction, recharacterizing Blum as an actor. In other publications, the ideological thrust of the project to both Kemalists and Islamic conservative forces in Turkey was registered more clearly (one writer joked that only Behar’s fictionality saved her from accusation). For him, Blum always maintained, it proved, that Behar was “real to me.” Curators and official exhibition publications kept the question open, and

The zone in Dubai mixes ecstatic expressions of urbanity with a complex and violent form of lawlessness, as the deregulation of labor laws within zones has facilitated stabilized forms of labor abuse to persist. In Dubai, the urban fabric is now an "aggregate of zones, each of which has often been named a city and has its own laws. Each enclave offers a different set of incentives including streamlined customs, inexpensive labor, foreign ownership of property, or rights to own real estate."47 This aggregate operates independently from and competes in scale with the city, producing political tension at the seams of jurisdictional change between the space of the zone and the city.

The exemptions granted to free trade zones in Dubai echo those granted to low-wage migrant construction workers in labor camps, suggesting similarities in the governance of these enclaves. In both cases, the autocratic structure is conveniently loosened to push forth the state's neoliberal aspirations. Free-trade zones in Dubai are unique in their jurisdiction as the government retains its agency to intervene in the management of the zone for monetary and promotional benefits.

Dubai has served host to a culture of “mad and meaningless overdose of themes, extremes, egos, and extravagance.”  

The oil boom in the late 1980s attracted many expatriates, who brought with them the cultures and symbols from their respective countries. Alanoud Alsharekh and Robert Springborg note in Popular Culture and Political Identity in the Arab Gulf States that “by the early 1990’s, popular culture in the UAE consisted almost entirely of idioms, symbols, and practices that originated outside the country”.

Dubai’s material ambitions know few limits with architecture at the core of Dubai’s evolution, perception, and ambition, representing political power, wealth, and ideology. The most symbolic of this globalized mess is the iconic skyscraper which proliferated during the economic boom preceding the global financial crisis of 2008.

During this moment of economic prosperity, Dubai marketed itself to the world as the ultimate luxury destination for tourism and elite business ventures. The desert playground on the South Eastern shores of the Persian Gulf promised a constellation of

theme parks, artificial islands, towering five-star hotels, and more than seventy grandiose shopping centers. At this moment, the state’s neoliberal aspirations reigned over its autocratic foundations.

However, in the midst of the financial crisis, a wide gap emerged between the image Dubai wished to project to the world and its dark, often disturbing reality. The financial crisis revealed Dubai’s economic and political volatility stemming from the tension between the state’s contradictory forms of governance. The large expatriate population, initially blinded by the allure of a ‘tax-free consumer haven’, was forced into a ‘mass exodus’, fleeing to escape debtor’s prison and leaving behind an accumulating pile of high-priced homes, cars, and luxury personal belongings. The resounding effects of the recession were further felt as the production of new icons was halted. “The city, which once claimed to have had more than 80 percent of the world’s cranes running, could only see deserted construction sites.”

These material excesses continue to occupy a large urban footprint and help sustain the illusion of a place of perpetual prosperity.

“Paris Universal Expositions of 1855 and 1867 were symbols of the empire, colonialism, and a celebration of commodity fetishism and technological progress. The display of manufactured items and technical developments in the world fairs of the 19th century parallel contemporary Dubai’s architectural displays. Like the World’s Fairs of the Industrial Era that sought to recreate scenes and spaces from their colonies, recreations of spaces in Dubai’s environment can be read as demonstrations of dominance.”

By virtue of numbers, the iconic high-rise is inherently tied to a culture of excess that emerges in Dubai. Icons are symbolic of the state’s neoliberal agenda for marketized urbanism, as well as demonstrations of dominance tied to a well-established autocratic regime. The icons in Dubai feature traits that contradict the very definition of an icon as "an image in the solid; a monumental figure; a statue." They are three dimensional, technologically sophisticated, lightweight forms wrapped by reflective surfaces, confidently embodying a global aesthetic of borrowed features and adapting them to become symbolic of the local context. Often operating in isolation, icons have historically relied on their individuality to serve as culturally significant structures. However, the icons in Dubai house mundane office spaces for mega corporations and generic five-star hotels in a context plagued by a multiplicity of other icons. This undermines the value of the icon and questions what constitutes a cultural icon in the 21st century. Furthermore, it asks what the effects of such an icon are. To understand the prevalent urban form in Dubai, the vertical icon is closely analyzed in terms of its level of engagement, ideas of repetition and difference, and local and global identities.


Icons
Excess / Generic / Globalization / Vertical

Experiencing the Icon

The vertical icon presents an opportunity for **multiple, unique levels of engagement**. The highly visible form of the icon is clearly distinguished from a distance, establishing its **iconicity** relative to its context. The relationship to the context, or lack thereof, is thus observed. Upon approaching the vertical icon, its surface begins to take on a new level of articulation as the material patterning (often achieved through a paneling system) becomes more evident. The duality of the glass and metal material palette is utilized to enhance and frame the entrance, which then become the **zone of surface treatment** and intervention at street level. The entrance is demarcates as it is a crucial component in the **transition from exterior to interior**, or public to private. Another important intervention observed at the street level is the **engagement of the vertical surface of the icon with the ground**. Often, a strip of material, which is not present elsewhere on the envelope of the icon, mediates a connection between the vertical and horizontal. As the eye moves upward, the form of the vertical icon, previously clear, is **distorted** by the strange elongated perspective; the elements that articulate the building disappear. Turning the corner presents more of the same - the building envelope is a **continuous surface** that wraps around, with little regard for environmental or contextual considerations.
Icons
Excess / Generic / Globalization / Vertical

Repetition and Difference

The familiar extruded form of the vertical icon serves as a prototype for the typology. While its presence remains consistent across different iterations of the vertical icon, the crown that adorns the top, where the “technical determinations” are weaker, is seen as an individualizing element that characterizes each icon in the skyline of the city. More often than not, the vertical surface of the icon is patterned by alternating horizontal bands of reflective glass and metal. Variations in the tint of glass and color of the metal classing serve to differentiate vertical icons from each other. The vertical icon requires an appendage which contains service programs that sustain the operation of the icon. There are two strategies to connect the tower and the appendage - the first connection is defined by separation, while the second is defined by insertion.
Local and Global

In its quest to portray the ‘global’ aspiration of the state while grasping on to a semblance of local identity, the envelope of the vertical icon has been reduced to a mere symbol of political ideology rather than an effective instigator of change. Efforts to localize the global icon have failed to reflect the local context beyond insignificant understandings of the envelope as a surface, rather than as a complex assemblage of materials. As Alejandro Zaera-Polo observes, this iconographic treatment of the vertical envelope performs as a “cover-up” for the technical and social processes taking place in the construction of this typology.
Their ideological understanding of history, an effective link between architectural technologies and policies needs to be established. It may be in bad standing openly in general, or in the state, capital, globalization, empire in general, and instant address specific ecologies of power comprising a heterogeneous mixture of bioresonance—markets, shopping, malls, residential towers, lifeways, gathering spaces, facades, carbon emissions, etc.—and the specific exercises of power within and between these organizations. I have shown: the building envelope as the field that may help us to draw these political attachments to the material world.

The Envelope as a Political Agent

The building envelope is possibly the oldest and most primitive architectural element. It materializes the separation of inside and outside, natural and artificial, it demarcates private from public and shared ownership; when it becomes a facade, the envelope synoptically serves as a representational device, in addition to its crucial environmental and territorial roles. The building envelope is the border, the front, the edge, the enclosure, and the point it is loaded with political content. It is an optimal domain to explore the politicization of architecture and, possibly, the development of a Ziegfeld.

The political performance of architecture has been historically attached to the plan or the section. The plan of the building organizes the power structure and protocols, while the section organizes the social stem and the building's relationships with the ground. The envelope, on the other hand, has been referred to as a "representational" or "symbolic" protocol. Whereas a plan is composed of interfaces, the envelope is composed of edges, lines, and points of intersection. The envelope, therefore, does not exist as a "text" or plan, but as a "material" or a "plane". The envelope is a material that is used to shape, contain, and define the space.

Facade's disappearance as a quasi-autonomous element capable of representing a building's internal organization. The modern search for spatial identity had an ascribed component: spatial boundaries are symbols of social opposition to be avoided in a homogenous democratic society. At the modern world order began to fail at the end of the 1980s, the more intrusive mechanisms of facilitation were reactivated. The postmodern approach reasserted the relevance of the envelope as a representational mechanism, taking advantage of new building technologies to create efficiencies achieved from both content and context, corresponding with the prevailing capitalist ideology of individualization and spectacular. Contemporary policies are now giving way to more powerful measures of coercion, physical and social, that are facilitating spatial and social change, and that are leading to the deconstruction of material resources. Both governmental agencies and corporate organizations are moving toward multiple layers of surveillance with intensified connections between them. Today, the emerging hierarchical order increasingly constructs its power by both producing and using diversity. The politics of rhetoric, symbolic meaning, and representation are giving way to new forms of representation, which are invested in modes of production and exchange and increasingly extended through the production of affect.

As the traditional articulations of the building envelope have also become technologically redundant, the envelope's own physicality, its fabrication and materiality, have taken on representational roles. Envelope design has consequently focused on the construction of the surface itself, both as an environmental and cognitive device, and as the vehicle that will produce the building's facade, making it human, and turn it into a political entity. Globalization has on the one hand neutralized the effectiveness of architectural languages, prompting the talk of symbols as communicative devices, while environmental and security concerns have simultaneously stunted the envelope's capacity for communication. The envelope needs to redefine the demands to provide identifiable images, for increasingly inconsistent and mobile community while sustaining itself against an increasingly insidious global atmosphere.
Incomplete Abandoned Buildings

“As a result of the crisis, numerous massive development projects were stalled, never completed, or abandoned. The Palm Jebel Ali and Deira, two palm-shaped artificial islands designed to be bigger than the Palm Jumeirah, have both been stalled indefinitely.”

Before Dubai suffered the consequences of the global financial crisis, a sense of optimism propelled development across the city. However, when the bills came due, it was evident that this form of top-down development was not sustainable; what once represented boundless ambition quickly became indicative of a deceitful mirage.

While Dubai’s central neighborhoods are recognizable through dense, iconic skylines that feature unremarkably different variations of the same row of spindly, generic towers, the illusion of unattainable perfection that the city strives to maintain is occasionally interrupted by the crude, concrete skeleton of an ambitious tower that never came to be. The abruptness with which these humble beginnings of icon-in-the-making declare themselves can be jarring as they break the monotony of generic “global” capitalist monuments that proliferate in Dubai, and present gaping holes in the idealized, Utopian reality that the city continues to fabricate.

Scattered across the city, at varying scales and levels of completeness, these abandoned buildings serve as hotbeds for illegal activities and contribute to the pollution of the environment, posing a risk to public health. Furthermore, these “ghost” buildings have become a burden and a source of inconvenience for residents due to their inherent danger, accumulated dirt and waste, growth of weeds, and the breeding of insects and rodents.

In 2006, the London Crown Tower, a promising hotel and shopping tower began to materialize in the popular neighborhood of Al Mankhool in Dubai. Amid the productivity and bustle at the job site, the great financial crisis struck, stalling construction indefinitely. Seemingly overnight, the building transformed from a symbol of growth and prosperity to a manifestation of Dubai’s underlying economic volatility. As it remained steadily incomplete for fourteen years since, the building became a consistent feature in the neighborhood’s identity, belonging to the area as much as the community mosque or the grocery store. Recently, a fresh coat of white paint was applied thinly to a small portion of the building’s surface. Gone was the dusty fabric that hung lazily on the building’s side for many years. Interestingly, Wahid Khan, a maintenance worker in the building adjacent, claimed that the building had been unveiled and painted randomly a few months prior, only to be abandoned again. Other members of the community, along the local shopkeep in the nearby grocery store, corroborated Wahid’s statements and confirmed the developing timeline of the project.
Many visible incomplete structural assemblies inexplicably adorned with finish materials such as metal cladding, glass panels, and railings are trapped in such an awkward limbo. A current rumor surrounding these incomplete developments surmises that these abandoned projects are getting something of a face-lift to make it seem like work is still underway. The rumor implies that the presence of such unfinished construction across the city hint at the magnitude of the economic failure. This is certainly not what the city wants to stand for or portray in the global media.

The incomplete building is fascinating in its potential to embody both the optimism of future development and the tribulations of the past. These decaying structures may possibly be the emirate’s best-kept secret.

Instead of moving toward greater transparency in operations, the emirate seems to be moving in the other direction. According to the New York Times, “a new media law makes it a crime to damage the country’s reputation or economy, punishable by fines of up to 1 million dirhams (about $272,00)”\(^\text{55}\) In an effort to control their reputation, the government enforces such laws, which prudently prevent people from explicitly voicing their opinions and concerns and reporting a crisis, to maintain political power and concentrate it in the hands of the political ranking. However, this results in the spreading of rumors as people are always suspicious of authority figures. It is therefore necessary to underscore the importance of rumors as part of research, especially in the autocratic neoliberal context of Dubai where information is deliberately made less accessible.

People construct their realities through rumors such as these because there is no information to refute this. Reality itself is not a constant and is prone to change. It is highly individualized and sustained by the information that is accessible.

In an interview with Ramy Al Khoury, Site Engineer at Dubai Contracting Company, he provided further explanations for this phenomenon from his personal experience.

**What happens to incomplete buildings if the project is canceled midway through construction?**

This depends on the clients and the situation. It is hard to generalize. However, that being said, typically the building will remain idle until a further agreement is reached. It will then either be sold to another client that will proceed with the remaining work or it will remain incomplete. The absolute last case scenario will be demolition.

**What is the hold period or time-frame before an incomplete project is demolished?**

It is very rare for a project to be demolished in Dubai. I have personally not seen any incomplete projects that have been demolished in Dubai. In most cases the client does not complete the project for financial reasons. Therefore, the client will never be able to pay the extra money required to demolished the building. Sometimes, it is easier, faster, and more cost efficient to sell the project to another client who will continue the work. In short, either a project will stop completely, or it will continue with another client or contractor. It will rarely be demolished.

**What happens to the construction materials left abandoned on the job site? Are they reused or disposed of or do they remain on site indefinitely?**

This depends on the contract with the contractor - sometimes the client will give the contractor a small amount of money for demolishing the building and then ask him to take materials from the building and sell it as scrap. There are many big companies in Dubai that will recycle the glass, steel, aluminum, and other materials.
Incomplete Abandoned Buildings

Abandoned construction sites contain large amounts of material waste which include nails, construction fabric, electrical wiring, re-bar, wood, metal channels, glass, pipes, cement, concrete masonry units, etc. These abandoned materials have the potential to be reused or recycled in other forms.
The materials of the abandoned construction yard accumulates in piles, collecting dust. In these material catalogs, various strategies of aggregation are explored in an attempt to recast the “CMU block” from construction waste and assess the aesthetic effect it produces. The system of aggregating materials requires careful consideration of the material seams created, where tension is highlighted. The aesthetic effect produced by this tension is of importance in these studies.

Beyond indexing leftover materials, the aggregated “CMU block” or “concrete panel” explores the potential for the envelope to move beyond its current understanding as a mere surface toward a volumetric, formal intervention with spatial implications. These material studies demand engagement through the qualities made available by the object. They attempt to hold concrete reality in focus without overmining for the sake of larger ideas or undermining for the sake of systemic knowledge. The ambition of these material studies is to disrupt existing material and labor flows, changing the manner in which one experiences them. By displacing the individual material fragment in an aggregated composition, a disjunction is created from the original conditions. This rupture allows the new object to “flow freely and enter into new relations to produce new allusions.”

Materials
Aggregates / Concrete / Defamiliarization / Seams

[Images of various aggregate materials and concrete samples]

Indicating materials and creating seams through aggregation.
Popular portrayals of Dubai have always alluded to a perpetually prosperous lifestyle, characterized by abounding wealth showcased through elaborate displays of luxury personal items in high-priced homes. However, in the book Gridlock Paris Mahdavi quotes Take My Junk business owner, Faisal Khan as saying, “there are about 200 people a day leaving Dubai, and they just leave their stuff behind. And it’s not just people, but companies too! On average we get around 5000 items every day. That is about 250 million kilograms of unwanted items.”57 The residue from this culture of excess includes items ranging from clothing and crockeries to furniture, cars, and building materials.

For those fleeing, disposing of these items is of paramount importance; in the absence of a state-recognized service, desperate expatriates sell or donate their possessions to privately-owned operations like “Take My Junk-UAE”, a company predicated on reducing waste by distributing unwanted items to low-wage workers in labor camps.

Take My Junk-UAE collects used items which would otherwise end up in landfills as donations or buy them for low prices from the city's residents. Faisal Khan, the owner of the operation, sheds light on the process in the local newspaper article by stating, "We routinely receive calls from people asking us to pick up stuff they don't want. These calls usually come following a cleaning spree or a plan to relocate within or outside the country. Besides such cases, we also get calls from people caught in difficult or desperate situations." Once collected, these items are sorted and stored in large warehouses situated in an industrial area at the outskirts of the city for a month. Unsold goods are distributed to low-wage migrant workers residing in labor camps. In a back room of the warehouse, workers craft furniture from new and up-cycled parts to be sold at heavily discounted rates.

To sustain the operation, these chaotically organized warehouses double as retail displays, offering a unique consumer experience which invited one to mine through enormous, delicately balanced piles of categorized items to find what is needed.
Personal Effects
Accumulation / Distribution / Discarded / Informal / Temporality

Img. 25: Clothing stored in bins, bags, shelves, and racks define spatial boundaries.

Accumulation / Distribution / Discarded / Informal / Temporality

Img. 26: Crockeries, lamps, decorative items, rugs, and appliances are displayed.
Personal Effects
Accumulation / Distribution / Discarded / Informal / Temporality

Img. 27: Bed frames, sofas, and cabinets are displayed in parts, against the wall, and as whole across the floor.

Img. 28: Tiles, doors, tires, and CMU scattered across.
"A total of 2053 abandoned vehicles were impounded in the first half of 2019, while as many as 3577 vehicles were confiscated in 2018."

“As indebted expats took flight to avoid prison, they left behind thousands of luxury cars to accumulate dust and the comments of passersby.”

Another consequence of the economic crisis and plunging oil prices is seen in the amassing of cars which are left to collect dust in the urban fabric and considered to be damaging to the cultural and aesthetic appearance of the city. According to Abdul Majeed Saifae, director of Dubai’s waste management department, cars that impact safety or obstruct roads are moved and impounded, but others are left as they were, sometimes for years before they are recovered.


“High-rise buildings continue to be seen as symbols of urban power, exclusivity, and uniqueness, all now accessible to the middle classes, and this dichotomy sets the stage for the high-rise’s political performance either as a device for the democratization of urban life or for the consolidation and protection of the urban elite.”

The existing zone is a hotbed for violence and abuse to continue unchecked. The zone offers little benefit to its host state. The enclave suggests entrapment, not freedom. To truly rethink the zone, it must be returned to the city, where a selective mix of state laws and zone incentives allow the zone to function as a productive proxy to the city. In this case, the laws that govern this new zone are selected to benefit migrant construction workers. As it is introduced into the city, the zone is able to mutate and breed with the predominant typology in the city - the vertical icon. We propose that the zone becomes a vertical typology, a new icon, now integrated into the city.

The introduction of this vertical zone to the image of the city deliberately links the zone to the larger networks and systems that sustain it. In its effort to engage the systems of the context, the vertical zone in the city becomes a contradiction to current, capitalist icons which are often clean, pure extrusions, simultaneously symbolizing marketized urbanism and autocratic dominance.

To update the politics of architecture in which the discipline is not merely reduced to a representation of ideal political concepts, but conceived of as an effective tool to produce change, the vertical reimagination of the zone aims to subvert and disrupt existing systems of governance in favor of a new reality which uses parafictional modes to look beyond the familiar and suggest alternative possibilities.

As the zone is relocated to the city, it undergoes a jurisdictional change. Now situated between the independence of the lawless enclave and the stringency of state governance, the ground of the new zone is activated as a seam of tension between these modes of operation. The vertical zone leverages this unique jurisdictional condition to engage with the public and the underlying hidden narratives of the city.

By opening up the zone and allowing for a new economy that engages the workers, this vertical zone recognizes previously informal economies run by migrant construction workers in labor camps and the potential benefits of those to both the host city and migrant workers. Material excesses due to political and economic volatility in the city are exploited to create new social process that lead to the creation of these new economies. Through these economic activities an encounter is staged between the zone, the state, and the low-wage migrant community.

Having jump started this economy, the zone can migrate to a different state.

The current aesthetic of tension between autocratic rule and neoliberal aspirations by productively using parafictional modes to create new plausible realities which emerge out of current hidden realities.
Five years ago, in my college application essays, I wrote about my favorite place in Dubai - a bookstore that I frequented throughout my high school years - and the sense of familiar comfort it imparted on me. For me, Dubai was my favorite restaurant, the building that my bedroom window overlooked, my school. In my comfortable, apolitical upbringing, I was uncritical of Dubai’s operations, and (as I realize in retrospect) unaware of its perception. It was only after I moved to the United States and introduced myself as being “from Dubai” that I realized how polarizing those two words could be. There were skeptics, who often remarked on the unsustainability of Dubai’s economic model. I have lost count of the number of Uber drivers who have informed me that Dubai is “at the top of my bucket list.” Others have expressed that they view Dubai as overrated, conservative, and exploitative, lacking culture and compassion. It became increasingly evident to me that being from Dubai would always mean something, even if it meant nothing exceptional to me.

If there is one thing architecture school has taught me, it is the ability to qualitatively analyze any context and extract meaning from it to propose something relevant, something productive. What is the role of architecture is not an uncommon question within the discipline, and the response to it is always evolving. Something is always at stake. In a professional elective course last year, I explored how architecture is capable of producing and communicating realities, and how art concepts such as realism (as seen in the work of Young Ayata) can be adopted within the discipline to allow form and the image of form to alter perceptions. I began my thesis year with a keen interest in aesthetic effects, particularly those achieved through parafictional modes as explained by Carrie Lambert-Beatty in her essay on the medium. Michael Blum’s exhibition on the life of Safiye Behar and the ramifications of it (see page 63) intrigued me and encouraged me to use this thesis as an opportunity to consider parafiction in the curation and presentation of research.

In this thesis, I was primarily interested in the ways people trust information that aligns directly with their worldview without critically assessing that information. Parafiction uses speculation and untruths to alter worldviews in a truthful way through the suggestion of plausible but non-existent realities. The research collected in this book is partly based on truth, and partly based on rumor, speculation, and obstinate belief. Each narrative of Dubai included in this thesis stems from strong views harbored by critics, residents, and institutions. Through this project, I am seeking to challenge the conventions of contextual research in a unique site like Dubai, where the inaccessibility of information leads to a proliferation of opinions founded on cynicism, skepticism, and distrust. I wonder whether an architectural proposition based on speculative realities and the image of that proposition can effectively alter familiarity and reality to instigate change.
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Key References


Bibliography

Additional References


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Gulf News, Jebel Ali Free Zone.

**Fig. 22:**

**Fig. 23:**
Ibid., 42.

**Fig. 24:**
Ibid., 48.

**Fig. 25:**
Ibid., 53.

**Fig. 26:**
Ibid., 54.

**Fig. 27:**
Ibid., 67.

**Fig. 28:**
Still from King Abdullah Economic City Promotional Trailer.

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Still from Tunisia Economic City Promotional Trailer.

**Fig. 31-32:**
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**Fig. 33:**
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**Fig. 49-51:**

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@skyscraperfan, Instagram, February 24, 2015.
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Fig. 55: @pabsdv, Instagram.

Fig. 56-57: The Address Downtown, Dubai, Flickr.

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