



Viewpoint

High-rise Dubai urban entrepreneurialism and the technology of symbolic power

Michele Acuto *

School of Regulation, Justice and Diplomacy, Australian National University,
Australia

Cities Research Cluster, National University of Singapore

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-first century metropolises are often engaged in a rivalry for primacy in many different geographical scales. Dubai, a relatively new urban settlement, is not immune from such endeavor. The Emirate has undertaken an impressive urban revolution in a rather explicit attempt to become a novel New York.

This viewpoint explores the present evolution of the city, illustrating how a centralized and hyper-entrepreneurial approach has characterized Dubai's attempt to ascend in the 'world urban hierarchy' and establish itself as the image of the 21st century metropolis. Contrary to much of the eulogistic take that often features in city rankings, an analysis of this venture through the city's contemporary urban restructuring unveils the problematic social effects of Dubai's quest for "symbolic power" – that technique of 'worldmaking' that confers influence by constituting the given by stating and mediating it. The compulsive sprawl of 'icons' and 'vertical cities' associated with this practice might set the Emirate on a perilous course with disastrous social consequences. In this view, the article draws upon some of the most astonishing works-in-progress of this city – and the Burj Dubai *in primis* – to explain the complexity of this power, and the many contradictions that can arise with it as quickly as Dubai's skyscrapers.

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Introduction

"Later, as he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr. Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous three months" J.G. Ballard, *High-rise* (opening line).

Testified by the sprawling of city evaluations across publications worldwide, from *Foreign Policy's* "Global Cities Index" onto *the Economist* "Urban Livability" annual lists, tabloids and magazines seem to have caught up with what researchers at Loughborough University's GaWC Centre have been doing for more than a decade: ranking metropolises. Ever since the early days of urban studies, scholars have been fascinated with those dominant metropolises where much of the human business is conducted. New York, Tokyo, Paris and London have regularly been looked at as the apogee of the so-called "world city hierarchy" (Hall, 1966). Thanks to their economic, cultural, religious and political functions, these urban settlements have positioned themselves as "obligatory passage points" (Callon, 1986) in the networks of social relations across the globe. Cities, long before theorists such as Patrick

Geddes, Lewis Mumford or Peter Hall described this competition for urban status, have always rivaled for primacy in many different geographical scales with varying degrees of entrepreneurship. Dubai is not immune from such endeavor (see Fig. 1).

I here want to explore the contemporary evolution of the Emirate, illustrating how a centralized and hyper-entrepreneurial approach has characterized Dubai's attempt to ascend in this hierarchy and establish itself as the image of the 21st century global city. Contrary to much of the eulogistic take that often features in city rankings, an analysis of this venture through the city's contemporary urban revolution unveils the problematic social effects of Dubai's quest for "symbolic power" – that technique of 'worldmaking' that confers influence by mediating people's understanding of the world. The compulsive sprawl of 'icons' and 'vertical cities' associated with this practice might set the Emirate on a perilous course with disastrous social consequences. This essay is an attempt to analyze these developments from a perspective that privileges social, rather than the much discussed financial and environmental sustainability. It starts by enquiring into the rationale of symbolism, and by observing Dubai's entrepreneurial evolution, considering how the city has attempted to master this 'soft' power and apply it through its urban order. A few years ago Mike Davis (2007) gave a distinctively pessimist outlook onto this "Mecca of conspicuous consumption" while outlining the Sheikdom's social polarization; 3 years later the situation might indeed have worsened, as the city has put even more emphasis on the risky practice of symbolic power.

* Address: School of Regulation, Justice and Diplomacy, Hedley Bull Centre, Australian National University, 2601 ACT, Australia. Tel.: +61 261250913; fax: +61 261257985.

E-mail address: michele.acuto@anu.edu.au



Fig. 1. The Burj Khalifa (formerly Burj Dubai) – tallest building in the world, symbol-to-be of Dubai's attempt to rise to world city status.

Technologies of symbolic power

Symbolic power is the capacity to control the social production of distinction by mediating other forms of power such as economics and religion through human technology. According to Pierre Bourdieu, who originally theorized it, the influence of symbolism rests upon “constituting the given by stating it” (1989, p. 14), thus mediating social experiences and imposing socially accepted meanings which in turn affect the actions of others. Directly connected with a foucauldian understanding of power as inherent quality of social interactions, this form of influence is an “invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 164). Humans can master the ‘technology’ of symbolic power by understanding the processes and dynamics that underpin the social world’s “symbolic systems” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 724). These latter are the intertwined dispositions of symbols – language, image and built space –

that form the core of human interaction: they allow for difference, and consequently for the coexistence and continual creation of individual as well as group identities. Mastering symbolic power, in this sense, means “pursuing distinction” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 730) and voluntarily producing separations and social worlds that affect others’ identities and freedom for action.

Symbolic power is thus exerted by socializing others into a certain representation of the environment we live in, therefore getting them to act accordingly. Symbolism is essentially a “power of definition” (Anderson, 1987) by which individuals or groups gain a social advantage on their ‘subjects’ thanks to the construction – in the minds of the latter – of some accepted imaginative geographies (Gregory, 1994). Typically, it can be exerted by either communicative or physical means, though hybrid forms abound in the age of the IT. For example, a group sitting in lecture theatre can be ‘coerced’ into exiting the room through its windows if the speaker’s rhetoric is so compelling that it convinces the audience these are the only viable ways out. However, a similar result can also be

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