



One of George Katodrytis's startling computer-generated renderings of how Dubai Hub One might look – if it gets the go-ahead.
George Katodrytis

WHAT PRICE CULTURE?

IN THE GREAT CITIES OF THE WORLD, ECONOMIC WELLBEING AND A HEALTHY CULTURAL LIFE GO HAND IN HAND. BUT IT'S A MIX NOT EVERYONE CAN EASILY REPLICATE. **ANNE HYLAND**

Just imagine. In New York, there is no Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Empire State Building, Madison Square Garden, Broadway, Greenwich Village, Macy's or New York Yankees. In London there is no Big Ben, Tower of London, Tate Modern, British Museum, West End, Harrods or English Premier League.

Now ask yourself: Would you visit or live in either of these cities?

In 1954, William Zeckendorf, an American real estate developer, explained in *The New York Times* that New York appealed to corporate executives as a place to live because it had "the theatre, the

opera, nightclubs and other facilities". Half a century on, New York and London are known today as "world cities", not just because they are heartbeats of capitalism, but because they are also sophisticated hubs of transport, communication and culture.

Culture not only makes up for the discomfort of having to live and work in a big, cramped, expensive conurbation but also gives a city a significant competitive advantage. It adds considerably to its image and international status, and draws in tourists and investment. Says Sharon Zunik, a professor of sociology at City University of New York and author of *The Culture*

of Cities: "The argument that culture has become the business of cities is truer now than it has ever been before."

For anyone who has been to New York or London, the cultural offerings of both cities form an essential part of their appeal. That is why the civic leaders of Abu Dhabi and Singapore have begun developing and promoting culture to broaden their cities' identities, in the aim of positioning themselves as cultural hubs in the Middle East and Asia. Neither place is under the illusion that it could one day rival New York, London or Paris in the global firmament, but there is hardly an alternative.

The oil-rich capital of the United Arab Emirates saw only one path, that of becoming the cultural portal to the Middle East, no matter the cost. It has signed a US\$500 million deal to build the world's biggest Guggenheim art museum and, at time of publication, was close to signing a US\$400 million contract to construct an annexe of the Louvre on its own soil.

Neighbouring emirate Dubai has emerged as the region's financial powerhouse, but is also developing its own cultural cachet. Last year, it hosted Christie's first contemporary art auction in the Middle East, and is constructing a skyline that has been likened to Manhattan. If architect George Katodrytis, who is based in Sharjah, has any success in getting his spectacular concepts for art hubs in Dubai developed then the city will certainly keep Abu Dhabi on its toes.

The UAE lies on ancient trading routes equidistant from Asia and Europe. Those trading routes once facilitated the exchange of ideas, food, languages, dress, art and religion. Today, however, there is widespread scepticism about the country's ability to successfully transplant something as intangible as culture.

(It also remains to be seen whether it will censor any of the Louvre masterpieces – be they depictions of the female form or works from other religions than Islam – that are loaned by the French government.) "It might be a good investment for tourist reasons but it will not be a dynamic cultural city," says Peter Taylor, a political geographer and urbanist who analyses global city hierarchy for Loughborough University in the United Kingdom.

"There are lots of examples of people trying to buy things in, in economic terms, and then basically being left with dated stuff at the end of the day because they don't have the dynamism."

Such dynamism, argues Taylor, comes from a city having a diverse and complex economy, and a large population base where immigrants, businessmen, scientists, educators and other social leaders help fund and inspire grassroots cultural development, as well as patronise the culture that is imported. Abu Dhabi, with 2.6 million people and an oil-dependent economy, struggles to meet that criteria.

“If a city is going down the niche which is culture, then the city has to be part of the process, which is culture and not just buying the product that is culture.”

As for Singapore, which already has a number of existing cultural attractions – colonial architecture, the Chinatown and Little India quarters, the Sentosa Island beach and entertainment resort – it is flexing its financial muscles in a bid to reinforce this spoke of its so-called “hub of hubs” strategy. Planned projects include two massive casino developments, the construction of a world-class sports venue to host big events from the region, and a possible deal with the Louvre to host an exhibition of Greek and Islamic art in 2008.

The S\$600 million (\$495 million) Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay development, a purpose-built performance arts space on the Singapore River, is already up and running.

Although Singapore has an open and flexible economy and is considered to have world-class financial, communication and transportation sectors, if it can complement these with a world-class cultural hub, then it will have another engine to ensure that the city-state continues to punch above its weight. But the South-East Asian city-state faces similar problems to its Middle Eastern

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counterpart. While Singapore's population is almost double Abu Dhabi's, it remains static. Further, Singapore's government, just like the hereditary ruler of Abu Dhabi, holds a tight rein on the media and society, and any criticism is muted. Would there be a Singaporean brave enough to write a book critical of the Lee family, Singapore's own political dynasty, and risk potentially being sued for defamation or jailed? Unlikely.

“I think to be a cultural capital in all senses a city has to be free to all sorts of new and critical and dangerously innovative currents of thought,” ventures Zunik. “[Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay] has been criticised by some people, at least initially, because the domestic artists and performers were

not benefiting, rather visiting artists, and orchestras and opera singers from other parts of the world.”

In this era of globalisation and homogenisation, it is becoming increasingly difficult for cities to differentiate themselves. Yet they must do so if they are to win investment and remain competitive. However, it does not always follow that finding a niche is a safe bet.

There have been numerous examples of cities that enunciated bold designs for their future only to come up short. After the reunification of East and West Germany, Berlin sought an identity as a “world city” and undertook massive investment to achieve this status. It failed and, worse, ended up broke.

The aim of Abu Dhabi and Singapore to be cultural hubs in their own right is admirable. Culture snobs might regard it as crass to think that you can buy yourself in as a cultural capital, much the way a gambler deals himself into a poker game, but the stakes are high and far too lucrative not to try. ■

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HIGH-RISE PRICE TAGS

LUXURY APARTMENTS IN THE WORLD'S MOST COSMOPOLITAN CITIES ARE BLOWING OUT IN PRICE. SHOLTO MACPHERSON

Whether staying temporarily on business or staying on to soak up the urban energy, lengthening lines of tenants in world cities are relentlessly driving up rental prices.

Rent caps and sell-out apartment blocks are signs that Dubai and Singapore, regional leaders of the Persian Gulf and South-East Asia respectively, are feeling the squeeze.

A property boom in Singapore is responsible for record prices for penthouse apartments. In December last year the Marina Bay Residences development sold for an unheard-of S\$3400 per square foot.

Another apartment block nearby sold all 330 apartments within two days in January for between S\$1500 and S\$2200 per square foot. The smallest, one-bedroom apartments brought in S\$1 million each.

A similar phenomenon is happening in Dubai, despite the government's best

attempts to muffle the rental market. The cost of renting a home in Dubai has doubled over the past two years, according to *The Economist*. After rents rose by 15% or more last year, the Dubai Municipality Rent Committee imposed a 7% cap for 2007. Landlords are prohibited from increasing rents this year if they already did so in 2006, or if their tenant signed a lease within the past 12 months.

In Hong Kong, sustained economic growth, accelerating inflation and a timely interest cut spurred the luxury residential market in the last quarter of 2006. For instance, sales in The Peak development surpassed all expectations. House number three sold for HK\$170 million, with average prices for units at HK\$33,000 per square foot. And the indications are that this year is going to be even hotter. A severe lack of new supply is exacerbating the



View from The Peak. AP

situation, as is an inflow of investment from the mainland as the renminbi (RMB) appreciates.

The average luxury apartment price in Hong Kong is expected to increase 15% to 20% in 2007, up from HK\$9753 per square foot, according to Colliers International. Demand for luxury apartments in Beijing and Shanghai has levelled off as the smaller cities move to centre stage. Chengdu, Shenzhen and Guangzhou have all experienced increases and expect more over the next 12 months, according to Colliers International.