

Todd Reisz, *Showpiece City: How Architecture Made Dubai*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021). Pp. 416. \$30.00 cloth.

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In November, 1959, John Harris arrived at Sharjah airport to create a town plan for Dubai for the princely sum of £1,250 (around \$40,000 in 2021). “Harris was one of the first to read the city like an expert, but he was one of the last to encounter an unmapped Dubai,” Todd Reisz writes in his remarkable contemporary urban archeology *Showpiece City: How Architecture Made Dubai*. John Harris was an unassuming man who clearly understood he had arrived at the right place at the right time. In addition to his town plans for Dubai and built artefacts, Harris constructed an remarkable archive of a period and context that was about to experience a profound transformation. Todd Reisz, who has established himself as the most important chroniclers of Dubai and Gulf urbanism, masterfully utilizes, analyzes and contextualizes, the archives of Harris to tell the story not only of this British architect and his work or even Dubai, but of the social power of urbanistic practice in our age of extended urbanization. Reisz investigation of Dubai from the early 1950s to 1979 illuminates how the “globalizing practices of architecture and urban development found its footing in the final years of British empire,” and in so doing provides critical insights into contemporary social processes of urbanization and urbanism (p.9).

Curiously, Reisz details in the acknowledgements, rather than in the introduction, how his earlier professional engagements with the Gulf resulted in him writing *Showpiece City*. Reisz trained as an architect and worked for the Dutch starchitect Rem Koolhaas in the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA). In 2006, Reisz with Koolhaas, curated the ground-breaking examination of Gulf urbanism in the exhibition “The Gulf” at the Venice Biennale. On the basis of this exhibition, two edited volumes were produced: *Al Manakh* (2007) and *Al Manakh: Gulf Continued* (2010). Two books that, along with Yasser Elsheshtawy’s (2009) *Dubai: Behind an Urban Spectacle* and Ahmed Kanna’s *Dubai: The City as Corporation*, have contributed to the formation of Gulf Urbanism as a recognizable sub-discipline within Middle East Studies. In the course of his work with OMA, Reisz notes that “the OMA team” made the connection that the firm of one British architect, John Harris, produced Dubai’s first town plan and the city’s first skyscraper. “Sorting through photographs with John Harris’s son Mark, I realized there was much more of a story to tell,” Reisz writes.

Much of the book is structured around the archives and work of Harris, who Reisz calls the first architect to be appointed in Dubai. This includes Harris’s urban plans for Dubai, the first in 1960 (chapter four) and 1971 (chapter eight) and then selected architectural work: Al Maktoum Hospital (chapter five), National Bank of Dubai (chapter six), Rashid Hospital (chapter seven) and Dubai World Trade Centre (chapter nine). In the selection of these works of architecture Reisz provides a different type of focal point in the rendering of Dubai’s urban history than is typically the case. The front cover notably features a double skinned concrete building not one

of glass and steel and the selected buildings types are not those that have become synonymous with Dubai, namely luxury hotels or residential real estate.

Reisz's admiration for the work of Harris shines through in the book. "Harris acknowledge throughout his career the need to ground new building in their environment," Reisz writes, "For him, this concern was usually expressed in terms of climate and economy" (p.325). Reisz stresses that Harris tried to push for an architecture in Dubai that would work with the climate and in contrast to much of the architecture that would begin to appear in the late-1970s that was determined to defy it. But Harris would also submit to the terms of the brief. In addition to the four buildings by Harris that Reisz structures his chapters around there is a final building that is detailed in the book's epilogue: Harris' design for the "Ruler's Diwan". This is the only project Reisz featured by Harris that draws overtly on the application of "Arab or Islamic architecture features", responding to the municipality's brief run by Kamal Hamza (p.323).

Reisz details how after Harris won the competition for the Diwan, Hamza's staff urged even more application of Islamic architectural features and applied they were: "oversize replicas of Bastakiya's wind towers encased the diwan's HVAC and elevator equipment; cast aluminum lattices ... *mashrabiya*," (p.325). To build the Diwan, Reisz details how much of Dubai's historic urban fabric and its coral buildings were destroyed: "The diwan's fanciful contrivances attempted a new history, not because there was no history but because a real history was not preferred" (p.328).

Showpiece City, however, is not a book focused on the contentious debates over representation and architecture that have been centered in Dubai or directly engaged in commenting on the role of superstar architects in Dubai, like his former boss, Rem Koolhaas. There is already a notable scholarship on this produced by Yasser Elsheshtawy and Ahmed Kanna, and in the edited books *The New Arab Urban* edited by Harvey Molotch and Davide Ponzini and *The Arab City: Architecture and Representation* edited by Amale Andraos and Nora Akawi. Rather, Reisz's is focused on the dynamic between "architecture", politics and power. Reisz has a specific and important understanding of architecture, however, that is not clearly outlined.

John Harris is no Rem Koolhaas. Harris's design of Al Maktoum hospital is not significant architecturally, Reisz who is determined to be generous to his archival benefactor, describes it as "barracks-like" (p.156). The design for the Dubai World Trade Center was modelled directly on the banal architecture of the World Trade Centers in Tokyo and New York by the architect Minoru Yamasaki that Harris visited. But this is not a book about John Harris's architectural work in Dubai because that would be of limited interest. Reisz credits Harris's wife and fellow architect Jill Harris with suggesting that rather than write a book about Harris he should write one about Dubai. But this seems a stretch, Reisz is unlikely to have wanted to write a book on Harris's professional but unremarkable series of buildings. The importance of Harris's buildings is not in their "architecture" (normatively conceived) but in the socio-political and economic context in which this architecture was produced and that Reisz does a remarkable job in illuminating in this book. It is through Reisz's utilization of Harris's architectural work and archive - made up of photographs, maps, drawings, and written material - that the significance

of Harris's work is made apparent; and what a notable loss to both Dubai and world architectural history, the demolition of Harris's architecture in Dubai constitute (both Al Maktoum hospital and NBD have long since been demolished).

Reisz has a specific and complex understanding of what he means by architecture, and in turn how it "made Dubai", but one that he unfortunately does not outline upfront. It is not until halfway through the book that Reisz in his detailing of Harris's design and construction of Rashid Hospital alongside a "spectrum of British experts and purveyors" that he arrives at his specific use of the concept: "Architecture is as much about built form as about the definition and management of a supply system around boosting the British economy" (p.209).

Despite Reisz's delay in laying out his understanding of his conceptualization of "architecture" the importance of this rendering of for understanding our contemporary urban world and moving beyond the analytically narrow debates around "representation" and the real value of this work. Reisz's book is a remarkable in-depth study of how the British went from exporting "Land Rovers, packaged foodstuffs and secondhand medical equipment" to architecture, like Rashid Hospital, that delivered "an entire living complex, replete with advanced medical technology, industrial equipment, cooling systems, and household furnishings," (p.215).

Unlike much of the critical scholarship on Dubai, Reisz does not utilize the term or scholarship around neoliberalism, or more specifically neoliberal urbanism. He does, however, provide ample empirical evidence of what I understand to be an neoliberal urbanism. Reisz's book

exquisitely details the intricate relationship between the British state, predominately British corporations, “architecture” and the formation of Dubai. He shows, for instance, how the precarious rule of Sheikh Rashid was cemented by the British state through, “the debt financing of oversize infrastructure” (p.85). Notably, the British state did not provide the financing (it merely raised it) and ensured that British experts and construction companies built the infrastructure (that it facilitated at a respectable distance): “all in the pursuit of embedding a role for itself in Dubai’s political and economic stability” (p.84).

Reisz details the critical role that corporations, like the British consultancy Halcrow, had in securing the rule of Sheikh Rashid, extending the otherwise faltering British colonial rule and its policies of financial extraction, and laying foundations of contemporary Dubai. The British state was heavily engaged in directing all of this but ensured, as much as was possible, indirectly. The intermediary role that the British government played, Reisz argues, was critical in the continued presence of corporations, such as Halcrow, and architects, like John Harris. Reisz notes that while Harris had the British government to thank for his introduction to Dubai and Sheikh Rashid, he achieved a lasting presence there because he was contracted directly by Rashid and not the British (p.160).

Showpiece City provides a nuanced tale of British empire, expertise and its integration into Dubai that is a result of Reisz critical engagement with the archival material he obtains. Reisz is alert to what his mainly Anglophone archival material leave out and deploys much skill and effort in bringing to the center details, such as the question of labor or the role of non-Western

experts, that are otherwise pushed to the margins. In the opening chapters, for instance, Reisz provides notable insights into the importance of Sudanese cities for Dubai's earliest blueprints and Sudanese expertise. Reisz explains that due to the British political agents previous postings: "They drew from their experience in organizing municipalities in Sudan and even recruited Sudanese employees to manage Dubai's new municipality." Thus, while Reisz does focus on British experts, officials and companies in the shaping of Dubai, he emphasizes the importance of: Dubai municipal experts who came from Sudan, like Kamal Hamza; and Dubai's first paid consultant, the Iraqi Adbul Salam Er Raouf, who did notable work in setting up Dubai's municipality.

Reisz's attentiveness to what the archives of Harris' and others leave out for their accounts, ensures that while the sub-title may place a focus on "how architecture made Dubai", he does not forget about how the laborer's, mainly from India and Pakistan, literally made Dubai. As Reisz details in the meticulous notes by Harris on the construction of Rashid Hospital, "one major component is conspicuously absent: labor," (p.215). Again, for the Dubai's World Trade Center the British contractor deleted the role of South Asian workers, "in order to project a truly British-built undertaking," (p.294). But of course, as Reisz makes clear, cheap labor was central to the very "rise" of Dubai as a notable trading hub: "Both Rashid and the political agency had crafted Dubai into a "paradise" for the large foreign contractors, who profited from cheap pools of labor" (p.175). Reisz also carefully reconstructs the story of the "quiet arrival" of a group of pilgrims as an example of how many labors from South Asia would arrive in this region and "contribute to the gradual buildup of Dubai's available cheap labor force" (p.75).

Reisz is hindered in his evident inability to engage Arabic language sources independently. The greater impediment remains, however, the broader environment to serious scholarship in Dubai on the city. It remains the case that the UAE is more welcoming to showpiece university campuses than serious scholarship, and that a palpable fear is expressed by potential interlocuters. As Reisz notes, there is no publicly accessible archive in Dubai and that many who agreed to talk about the history of Dubai either did so nostalgically or “do not want to say anything possibly construed as negative. Stories prefaced with “You can’t write this” are often not scandalous,” (p.15). The absence of a depth of knowledge on Dubai’s internal social and political dynamics does make its mark on the book. Calling for much needed further research, Reisz writes: “Focused on the histories of foreign expertise, this book provides minimal elucidation on a significant aspect of Dubai’s urban development, namely the wealthy merchants whose family business presided over Dubai’s port since as early as the nineteenth century” (p.17). This complex ecology is often referred to merely as “the ruler and his advisors” or the “merchants”. The fascinating characters that existed within Sheikh Rashid’s inner circle, like Mahdi Al Tajir (also now popularly known as the “richest man in Scotland”), and other wealthy merchants role in Dubai formation remains largely invisible.

If Paris is the capital of modernity, then Dubai is the capital of late modernity. Reisz’s forensic account of “how architecture made Dubai”

