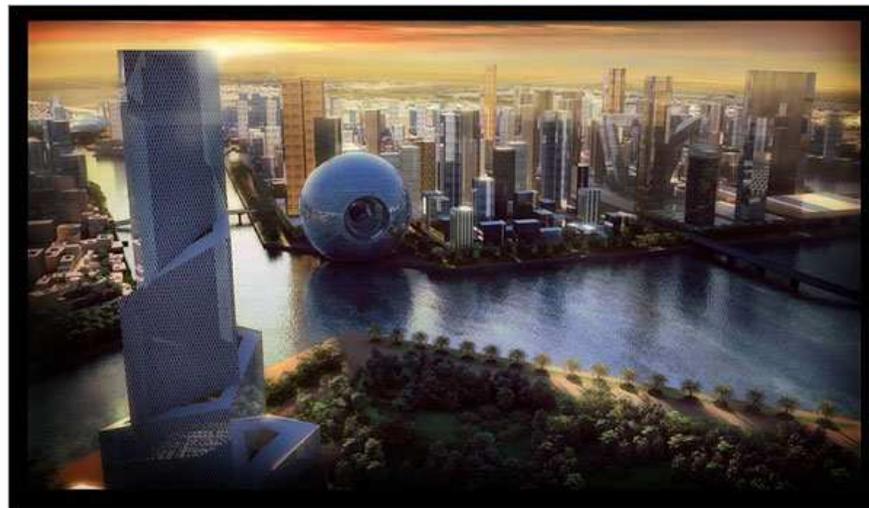


ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

City on the Gulf: Koolhaas Lays Out a Grand Urban Experiment in Dubai



Office for Metropolitan Architecture

Rem Koolhaas's vision for a development in Dubai mixes the bold and the nondescript.

By NICOLAI OIROUSSOFF Published: March 3, 2008

It has been 12 years since the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas unleashed his concept of "the generic city," a sprawling metropolis of repetitive buildings centered on an airport and inhabited by a tribe of global nomads with few local loyalties.

Now he may get a chance to create his own version.

Designed for one of the biggest developers in the United Arab Emirates, Nakheel, Mr. Koolhaas's master plan for the proposed 1.5-billion-square-foot Waterfront City in Dubai would simulate the density of Manhattan on an artificial island just off the Persian Gulf.

The mixed-use project, startling in scale, is a carefully considered critique not just of the generic city but of a potentially greater evil: the growing use of high-end architecture as a tool for self-promotion.

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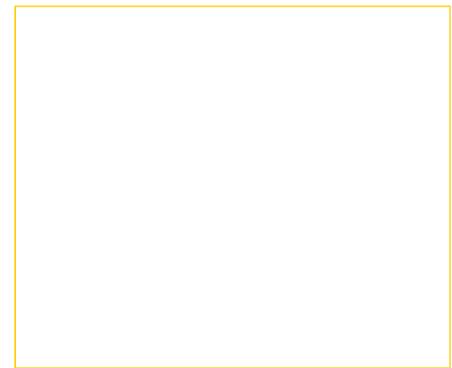
The Office for Metropolitan Architecture A model of Rem Koolhaas's Waterfront City in Dubai.

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The Office for Metropolitan Architecture
A rendering envisioning the interior of
the project's 44-story sphere.

His strategy is not to reject either trend outright but to locate each one's hidden, untapped potential, or as he puts it, "to find optimism in the inevitable."

In Dubai Mr. Koolhaas and his Office for Metropolitan Architecture seem at first glance to have simply combined the two concepts, creating a hybrid of the generic and the fantastic. The core of the development would be the island, which would be divided into 25 identical blocks. Neat rows of towers — some tall and slender, others short and squat, depending on the zoning — line the blocks, as if a fragment of Manhattan had been removed with a scalpel and reinserted in the Middle East.

The monotony is broken by mixed-use structures whose immense scale and formal energy draw on mythic examples from architectural history. A spiraling 82-story tower might have been inspired by the minaret of the ninth-century Great Mosque of Samarra in Iraq; a gargantuan 44-story sphere brings to mind the symbolic forms of the 18th-century architect Étienne-Louis Boullée. The tilting intertwined towers of a complex dubbed "the loop" are a more elaborate version of Mr. Koolhaas's headquarters for China Central Television, being built in Beijing.

These varied elements are organized with Mr. Koolhaas's customary flair for composition. (Although his desire to tackle big urban issues can sometimes make him seem dismissive of the design work that makes up the average architect's life, he remains one of the art's greatest practitioners.)

The island project would be a perfect square, emphasizing its isolation. The tallest towers are concentrated along the project's southern edge to shield the interior blocks from the blazing sun. The gigantic sphere is placed precariously at the water's edge, setting the entire ensemble artfully off balance. The spiraling tower stands just across from it, on a narrow spit of land that forms a barrier between the island and the gulf.

The way Mr. Koolhaas addresses the island's isolation raises the most difficult questions. If his island of densely packed towers evokes a fragment of the great 20th-century metropolis, it can also conjure its dystopian twin: a miniaturized version of a city of glittering towers built for the global elite, barricaded against the urban poor and its makeshift shantytowns. (Think of George A. Romero's 2005 flick, "Land of the Dead," with its menacing corporate masters peering down on a world of faceless zombies.)

Mr. Koolhaas softens this effect by creating a series of somewhat tenuous connections to other developments on the mainland. Along with four slender bridges — one on each side of the square — Mr. Koolhaas plans to link the project to the fledging Dubai transit system, which is already under construction. More towers would rise opposite the island on a curved embankment, as if the island city were spilling beyond its boundaries.

But the thrust of his strategy is to turn the logic of the gated community on its head: isolation becomes a way to trap urban energy rather than keep it out. His goal is to imbue his waterfront enclave with enough complexity to provide a distilled version of the great metropolis within this moated sanctuary.

A waterfront boardwalk would surround the island. A narrow public park slices through its center; shaded sidewalk arcades are meant to draw people out of the air-conditioned buildings. In its northeastern reaches the plan's geometric grid gives way to an intimate warren of alleyways, like a traditional souk.

Mr. Koolhaas takes a similarly textured approach to the buildings themselves. The sphere, for instance, is conceived as a self-contained three-dimensional urban neighborhood. Various public institutions are encased within smaller spheres suspended inside the space that are connected by escalators enclosed in long tubes. These smaller spheres are embedded in layers of residential housing, like embryos floating in a womb.

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In the spiral tower terraces wrap around a soaring public atrium crisscrossed with escalators and walkways, an effort to pull the surrounding street life right up through the interiors.

Will it work? Some of the public zones, still in the earliest stages of design, are surprisingly conventional, including the formal arrangement of the park, which could be likened to the Champs-Élysées. So far the boardwalks framing the project lack the intricate layering of public and private spaces found, say, on the Corniche in Beirut.

Whatever his social goals, Mr. Koolhaas will have little control over the makeup of this community, which, if current development in waterfront Dubai is any indication, is still likely to serve a small wealthy elite.

Then there is the question of scale. Covering six and a half square miles, the island is roughly the size of a small urban neighborhood. Is this large enough to sustain the dense social fabric that Mr. Koolhaas is after? Or is it more likely to become a new species of gated enclave, architecturally stupendous yet profoundly exclusionary? Does its compact size make it easier to seal off from supposed undesirables?

Whatever the answers, Mr. Koolhaas's design proves once again that he is one of the few architects willing to face the crisis of the contemporary city — from its growing superficiality to its deadening sterility — without flinching.

If he fails he at least will have raised questions that most architects would prefer to leave safely unexplored. If he succeeds he could bring us closer to a model of a city that is not only formally complex, but genuinely open to the impure.

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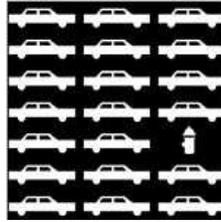


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