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Dubai's Long Goodbye

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Abstract

This essay details the effects of the global economic crisis on Dubai and assesses the future implications for urban and economic development in Dubai itself and within its broader sphere of influence. Dubai's real estate-led six-year boom between 2003 and 2008 is located within the emirate's growth strategy, which expressed the ruling al-Maktoum family's long-running ambition for the city-state to ascend to global-city status on the basis of significant investment in economic infrastructure over decades to service a regional trading-hub role. Urban development during the boom years was accelerated in terms of process and built outcomes as state-backed real estate companies borrowed heavily on capital markets and designed and constructed an extraordinary array of commercial, industrial, retail, residential and tourism facilities to cater for a planned population increase on the basis of growing economic activity. The global economic crisis brought the boom years to an end from late 2008 onwards: construction slowed down, if it did not halt altogether, property values dropped by half, and the finances of state-owned companies are undergoing restructuring in the face of creditor demands. A durable pick-up in economic growth is likely to impel Dubai's ruling elite to re-emphasize the city's regional trading and service-centre role based on strong investment in aviation, shipping and logistics infrastructure. While real estate development will be demoted as an economic priority, Dubai's city-building practices will continue to influence the current wave of global suburbanization in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

Introduction

Dubai's six-year economic boom between 2003 and 2008 was extraordinary in its scale and rapidity. Construction and real estate development were highly visible, and accounts by both journalists and urban scholars were often simultaneously febrile and partisan. Mike Davis's influential critical fantasia 'Fear and Money in Dubai' (2006) was the mirror image of Afshin Molavi's 'Dubai Rising' (2005), a paean to Dubai's 'dazzling ambition' (*ibid.*: 104). Davis famously portrayed Dubai as 'the planet's biggest building site: an emerging dreamworld of conspicuous consumption and . . . supreme lifestyles' (2006: 49) based on cheap construction labour, while Molavi saw the city-state 'moving toward that ultimate urbanist goal of the twenty-first century: to become a post-industrial, modern, high-tech city full of knowledge workers and service industries' (2005: 107). Many other accounts also focused on the depiction and interpretation of Dubai's built environment and its architecture, but as the writers were presumably suitably bedazzled, tended towards the inconclusive (Bagaeen, 2007; Acuto, 2010).

Dubai fever is now over: the downward spiral since September 2008, after the global economic crisis struck, has been wrenching. Initial accounts, notably in the UK press, were a mixture of shock and *schadenfreude*. The emblematic myth was that of the return of planeloads of pink-skinned and humbled expatriates to their home country's sunless suburbs after dumping their unpaid-for 4X4s in long-term parking at Dubai International Airport.

However, a view of Dubai's recent experience as one of hubris and folly justly punished as the property bubble bursts obscures the importance of the past decade's urban and economic growth in the emirate — and, by extension, that in the rest of the seven-member federal United Arab Emirates (UAE) and in the Gulf region in general. It has perhaps been too easy to caricature, patronize or excoriate Dubai's development from a distance (or on the basis of fly-in visits) rather than put it within its historical- and political-economy contexts and accord it the more dispassionate analysis that this and other contemporary exemplars of fast-paced and large-scale urban development in crisis require in order to assess their future prospects and wider significance.

Dubai's real estate boom, however wild and fantastic it may have appeared, was no accident. It has to be understood on the basis of its location at the heart of the emirate's growth strategy for the past decade, as the ruling al-Maktoum family under its ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rachid al-Maktoum sought to realize a far longer-run familial ambition for the city-state: to ascend to global-city status and become the undisputed trading, commercial, financial and tourism hub of the Middle East, and a key entrepôt for a region spanning South Asia, North and sub-Saharan Africa, the Gulf states, Iran and further afield, central Asia and the Caucasus, China, Russia and Europe (Molavi, 2009).

Infrastructure and growth

Dubai should not therefore be seen as springing up, post-2000, as an 'Instant City' (Bagaeen, 2007). It was the realization of an ambition that was built upon a half-century-long tradition of infrastructural development promoted by the family, notably the large-scale port, airport, free zone, airline, highway and telecommunications projects constructed from the 1960s onwards in service of Dubai's regional trading-hub role (Elsheshtawy, 2004; Pacione, 2005; Davidson, 2008).

The importance of this infrastructure and the economic activities and assets it facilitated needs to be emphasized. A first step under Sheikh Rashid, ruler from 1958, was the dredging and deepening of the existing port on Dubai Creek and the development of two new ports on the coast: Port Rashid, completed in 1972, and the US $2.5 billion Jebel Ali Port, 40 km to the south of the city centre. To this was attached heavy industrial infrastructure: notably an aluminium plant established on the coast near Jebel Ali in 1975, its excess heat being used by an adjacent desalination plant, and the massive Dubai Dry Dock. Dubai took a leap forward as a manufacturing location with the establishment of the Jebel Ali Free Zone in 1985 next to the port. Prospective investors were provided with large incentives; by the early 1990s there were 300 companies in the zone. Industry was also supplemented with business and personal services. The Dubai International Trade Centre — later World Trade Centre — was completed in 1979 as an attractive facility for international business services, and opened up Sheikh Zayed Road as a corridor for commercial growth.

Spurred by the formation of Emirates Airlines in 1985 (capitalized by the government with US $10 million) and by an expanded Dubai International Airport, attention was placed on the development of hotel facilities. By 1985 there were over 40 hotels, located principally in the traditional centre of Dubai, in proximity to the Creek. These were joined later in the decade by the first large new hotels on the Gulf coastline.

Under Sheikh Maktoum, who became ruler after Sheikh Rashid's death in 1990, and his brother Sheikh Mohammed, who was appointed Crown Prince in 1995 (and ruler in 2006), further new infrastructural and economic assets were created, principally in what was then known as the 'new-economy' sectors of knowledge/technology-based businesses, tourism and real estate. As visitor numbers grew, new hotels and amenities were developed on the coast. At the same time, the development drew on its trading history, and the city's first large-scale malls were developed: Al Ghurair City and Deira City Centre. In 1998, a new terminal was completed at the airport. In the late 1990s, advanced business/producer services and the technology, media and communications sectors were promoted. Based on the free-zone template, Dubai Internet City (announced in 1999, completed a year later, with tenants including Dell, Siemens, HP, Microsoft, Oracle and Cisco Systems), Dubai Media City (CNN, Reuters, Dow Jones) and Knowledge Village were all planned and then constructed. To house the growing population of professional service workers, residential and mixed-use facilities were built adjacently.

The boom

Rather than starting urban development anew in Dubai in the past decade, with government as principal strategist, facilitator and actor, there was a huge acceleration in pace and intensity as new economic opportunities, especially in construction and real estate, business services and tourism/leisure, were simultaneously created and accommodated. Learning from Singapore's earlier experience, Dubai, like Shanghai, explicitly followed a global-city creation strategy and decided 'to offer world class attractions to compete for international investment, tourism and jobs — just as established cities such as London and Paris do' (Tricks and McGregor, 2004).

Dubai Inc., the term often used for the interpenetration of the al-Maktoum family and the government's business interests, loomed largest here as real estate development came to the fore, principally in the form of major directly or indirectly state-owned real estate firms, Dubai Investment Corporation's listed Emaar, Dubai World's Nakheel, and the three property entities of Sheikh Mohammed's own umbrella company Dubai Holding, namely Dubai Properties, Tatweer and Sama Dubai.

The firms were strongly encouraged to outdo one another in developing very large-scale, expensive and — often seen from the outside as garish and overblown — 'iconic' projects such as Nakheel's offshore Palm (Jumeirah, Deira and Jebel Ali) and The World developments, Tatweer's US $110 billion ultra-theme park Dubailand, and Emaar's 828 m tower, which opened as the world's tallest building in early 2010, named Burj Khalifa (formerly Burj Dubai) after Abu Dhabi's ruler and president of the UAE, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al Nahyan.

These projects, as they gained worldwide attention, or rather, notoriety, served the further purpose of promoting and marketing Dubai's growth strategy. Often overlooked, Dubai's traditional economic strengths of shipping, aviation and trade were also expanded throughout the decade, resulting in the location of new port, airport and related business and commercial facilities in or adjacent to its coast (Nicolson, 2006). This stimulated the further development of advanced-business-service and technology-based firms located in purpose-built, incentive-laden business zones, or 'cities' as they are termed, the most important of which is Dubai International Finance Centre (DIFC), which opened in 2004, as well as of export-based heavy and increasingly also light industry sectors, located in nearby free-trade zones.

The large real estate companies concentrated their market power by collectively controlling up to an estimated 70% of the market. Excess global liquidity from 2002 onwards and the gigantic petrodollar surpluses of the Gulf states from mid-decade played a crucial underpinning role, as did the ready availability of a cheap and hyper-exploitable migrant construction workforce from South Asia.

However, with oil making up only some 5% of Dubai's output (construction/real estate and trade account for some 25% each), real estate development firms, large and small, were driven to borrow massively from the capital markets to deliver development on the scale mandated. By October 2008, Moody's estimated that the leverage of government-backed Dubai companies had already risen to close to US $50 billion, which was more than the 2006 gross domestic product for the Dubai emirate.

The companies mentioned above conceived a real estate development model to cater for a planned population increase on the basis of new economic activities. In physical terms this combined, typically in mixed-use formats, new onshore — and offshore (Dubai's coastline is only 72 km; given its considerable amenity value, new coast was required) — residential developments with retail and recreational facilities. Equally, new hotels and attractions were built to accommodate a very large-scale planned increase in tourist numbers, split roughly between 60% leisure tourism and 40% business tourism. Overall demand for what was built was to be driven by the influx of people: on the one side expatriates from as many as 202 countries, according to the Ministry of Labour, whose residency in the emirate is tied to employment contracts; on the other side, tourists drawn by the city's beaches, malls and theme-park attractions.

The actual process of real estate development was also accelerated. This resulted in a hyper-aggressive, free-wheeling, super-speculative and largely uncoordinated style of carrying out property development. Typically, after land acquisition (often the granting of government-owned land), projects were envisioned and sketched, often airily, and then announced and marketed. Marketing became a self-reinforcing practice as developers seemingly came to believe the promises of their own materials. Only after this did detailed design and fast-tracked construction actually occur (Parker, 2005). New residential property was sold off-plan, with much bank-loan-funded speculation ('flipping') occurring long prior to any occupation taking place.

Huge opportunities were provided for many of the world's prominent engineering and construction companies and urban professional service firms. At the boom's height, real estate development in Dubai probably represented the largest, most densely localized concentration of this activity anywhere — to which a larger overall concentration in the Gulf could be added (Koolhaas *et al*., 2007).

While precise statistics are not obtainable, the following indicators demonstrate the scale of Dubai's development during the boom:

- From 2002 onwards, as the emirate grew at an average of 8.5% per year, Dubai was said to be growing by between 100,000 to 150,000 new people a year. An estimate calculated the population at 1.4 million in 2007, with expatriates and migrants comprising at least 85% of the total, some 25% or 350,000 of whom were construction workers housed in grim labour camps. At what appears now to be an over-optimistic growth rate of 8% for expatriates and 2.5% for Emirati citizens, the population would reach 2 million by 2012 (Morgan Stanley Research Europe, 2008). Estimates for the population by 2020 ranged from 3.6 to 5 million.

- The number of residential units in Dubai rose from 145,000 in 2000 to 245,000 in 2007. Annual additions to 2010 of 61,000 units were anticipated, to make a total of 429,000 units for that year. The market was boosted by the announcement in 2006 of two of three sections of a property law that allowed foreigners the right to freehold ownership in specified locations. By 2008 there were some 30,000 foreign-owned homes.

- Retail space expanded phenomenally to reach 1.6 million square metres in 2007, doubling to 3 million in 2009, with 4.1 million anticipated for 2010. Dubai has often been said to have the world's greatest concentration of shopping facilities relative to population size.

- The supply of office space reached 1 million square metres in 2007, and was to rise to 2.2 million in 2009 and 3.4 million in 2010. At an occupancy rate of 98% by 2008, virtually full occupancy was reached, which provided justification for the further large-scale production of office space.

- Tourist numbers doubled from 2.8 million in 2000 to 5.8 million in 2005. The government target for 2010 was 10 million. Current estimates for 2010 are now 8.5 million, with 10 million to be reached by 2012.

- As Dubai's airline, Emirates, rose to become one of the world's top ten carriers, passenger numbers to Dubai International Airport (DIA) reached 25 million in 2005. Late 2008 saw the completion of a US $4.1 billion expansion that enabled the airport to cater for 70 million passengers per year.
- By 2007, hotel room numbers had reached 30,000, up one-third from 2000, with an average occupancy rate of 85%. Dubai's hotels at the time, particularly at the top end, had the world's highest revPAR (revenue per available room) (HVS International, 2005). With some 100 new hotels estimated to be under construction at that time ('u/c' in the Dubai lexicon), the biggest growth was still to come, with 80,000 rooms expected by 2011. Most of these additions were to occur in 2009.

Such urban growth in the aggregate far exceeded the capacity of the existing urban planning system: an outmoded *Structure Plan for the Dubai Urban Area 1993–2012* produced for Dubai Municipality in 1995 was never updated, but condensed into a zoning map and complemented by another map illustrating Dubai's 'Major Projects'. Detailed planning (master and site planning and building permitting) was effectively privatized and taken in-house by the large real estate companies. This suited the fast-tracked style of urban development in operation, but worked against the provision of overall city-level strategic oversight and guidance.

Discrete developments were rolled out one after another, centred on Sheikh Zayed Road, in what became known as 'New Dubai' (the Dubai Marina, Emirates Hills, Al Sufouh and Al Barsha) adjacent to the coast and also deeper into the desert. Despite the construction of highways, transportation infrastructure failed to keep up; epic traffic congestion resulted. The environmental consequences of the decade's development were also negative: Dubai's — and the UAE's — extravagant per-capita water and energy consumption are amongst the highest in the world, the city's offshore area was silted up, and the quality of its beaches compromised (Krane, 2009: 223–31).

The crash

Despite the doubts that were periodically voiced about its extraordinarily high level of ambition, Dubai's real estate-led growth strategy appeared, well into 2008, at least within its own terms, to have been strikingly successful. Demand for housing far exceeded supply, and rental rates continued to rise strongly. In fact, residential property appreciated at an average rate of 48% to the end of the first quarter of 2008, the highest in the world at that time. Demand for hotel rooms also ran well ahead of supply.

Despite earlier intimations of high levels of indebtedness in government-owned companies, and of corruption and speculation running wild, the first signs of market difficulty in September 2008 were greeted with denial by the Dubai government (at federal level, the UAE guaranteed bank deposits and injected capital into the banking system). November that year saw the widely-reported US $20 million opening of Atlantis, Nakheel and South African developer Sol Kerzner's US $1.5 billion resort complex on Palm Jumeirah.

From that time onwards there was only bad — and worsening — news as the depth of the economic crisis, particularly in the real estate sector, was revealed. As demand for residential property collapsed, housing prices plummeted by a quarter in the fourth quarter of 2008, and by approximately the same in the first quarter of 2009. Rents fell by 50% in 2009. In early 2009, it was reported that half of all construction projects in the UAE, worth US $335 billion, had been delayed or cancelled.

The whole of Dubai was affected, but most particularly its proposed expansion to the south towards the Abu Dhabi border, as large-scale extensions to Jebel Ali port, some work on the new Al-Maktoum International Airport and an associated 'aviation community', Dubai World Central, and the huge residential and mixed-use communities

Dubai Waterfront and Arabian Ranches were all put on hold, as were innumerable smaller developments all over the rest of the city.

Also, and alarmingly for Dubai's strategic goals, the required linkage between population influx, economic growth and real estate take-up appeared to be fraying. In January 2009, analysts from UBS, in an internal report entitled 'Will Dubai's population grow in 2009?' predicted an 8% decline in 2009, followed by a 2% drop in 2010. Later assessments were even more severe (a 20% drop was floated), as the scale of retrenchments grew. With residence permits tied to employment contracts, lower-skilled construction and service workers were hardest hit. Their swift repatriation had significant negative repercussions on their remittance-dependent home communities in South Asia and South-East Asia (M. Rahman, 2009). Professional workers were better off: many took the opportunity to seek work elsewhere in the UAE or the Gulf region.

There were a number of key responses to the crisis in 2009. As the scale of indebtedness of Dubai's government and government-owned companies was revealed to be higher than previously thought, at around US $80 billion (2008's GDP was US $82 billion), some US $25 billion of it due by the end of 2010, a five-year unsecured bond issue of some US $20 billion was proposed. In February 2009, after delaying its decision for some months, the UAE central bank in Abu Dhabi subscribed to US $10 billion of the bond. This effective bail-out by oil-rich Abu Dhabi, which dominates the federal government, was greeted with general relief by the markets, as was its implication that a wealthier and fiscally more conservative Abu Dhabi would rein in its neighbour's excesses (*The Economist*, 2009a; 2009b).

Then at mid-year, Moody's downgraded the ratings of a number of Dubai Inc. companies, including the real estate developers. Dubai World simultaneously reported restructuring some of its real estate arms, after making significant job cuts, including up to 1,000 cuts that were reported by Nakheel. Another announcement followed that the relatively stronger Emaar was conducting merger talks with the three struggling Dubai Holding property companies. This merger was later confirmed, meaning that Emaar was to stand in the centre of a new company that would be the biggest developer in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, with combined assets of over US $50 billion and a current portfolio worth US $18.5 billion.

The Dubai government asserted that this new entity was required to deal with current challenges, and, as quoted in S. Rahman (2009) went on to state that:

> The proposed consolidation comes with the resolute dedication to transform Dubai into a global city since construction and development are a primary engine of growth. Dubai will thus rise up to the current challenges with hallmark agility and responsiveness. The consolidation of these leading real estate entities will not only build on the remarkable achievements in Dubai during the last three decades, but more importantly, marks the start of a new chapter in the annals of real estate globally.

A week later, on a visit to Dubai, the British trade minister, Lord Davies, insisted that British contractors, engineers and other suppliers in Dubai who were owed US $636 million needed to be paid as soon as possible.

Finally, in late November 2009 Dubai descended into crisis when Dubai World acknowledged its inability to meet a US $4 billion debt repayment scheduled for a month later (in the form of *sukuk*, or Islamic bonds, owed by Nakheel) and requested a six-month standstill on US $26 billion in debt obligations (the total owed by Dubai World was as much as US $59 billion). Global financial markets were shaken, and Dubai's image and reputation plummeted further when the proposed moratorium was extensively reported worldwide. After a nervous two-week wait, Abu Dhabi agreed to a US $10 billion central-bank bail-out, in the process paying off Nakheel's immediate debt (Khalaf and Kerr, 2010).

Intensive negotiations ensued, and by March 2010 a plan was presented to Dubai World's creditors, which was well-received. By mid-year, agreement appeared close. At the same time, Nakheel proposed a restructuring plan to its own creditors — and Dubai's government sought approval for a US $23.5 billion restructuring of Dubai World, which featured capital contributions to both companies, Nakheel particularly, in order to get development moving again. Attention shifted to the Dubai government's own debt, estimated at US $110 billion, and to the problems of Dubai Holding, which owed US $12 billion. In all, Dubai's state-backed companies face annual debt repayments of US $15 to 20 billion over the next three years (Kerr, 2010).

Reckoning: the long goodbye

What next, then, for Dubai? Before the crisis of late 2009, the influence of the gleeful but unrealistic 'Goodbye Dubai' perspective taken by many commentators was being superseded by a view of Dubai going through a necessary, painful correction, and emerging out of it with the froth — 'Disneyland Dubai' — sloughed off, but with fundamentals broadly intact (Molavi, 2009). It was even suggested that the correction could herald a less autocratic, illiberal, undemocratic and opaque way of conducting economic and political life in the emirate.

The descent into crisis has weakened this second view, which in any event was probably over-optimistic. The emplacement of construction and real estate development at the very core of this past decade's growth strategy means that the sector's huge problems, as seen elsewhere in the world, affect every other aspect of social and economic life in Dubai. If bottom was reached in late 2009, a recovery will nevertheless take time — and the economic challenges ahead are, as indicated here, considerable. The effects of crisis have also been felt politically and have had an impact on Dubai's growth strategy.

At the political level Abu Dhabi and Dubai are interlinked, and the bail-out actions of the former, with its immensely deep pockets (90% of the UAE's oil reserves, a US $500 billion Sovereign Fund), have demonstrated that it will not allow Dubai to fail (*The Economist,* 2009c). But Abu Dhabi's influence over Dubai appears at the same time to have grown, as was formally acknowledged by the surprise last-minute renaming of the Burj Dubai to Burj Khalifa. As the focus of urban growth and development shifts southwards to Abu Dhabi for now, and its developers emulate Dubai's global-city strategy, albeit in a more measured fashion, the city-state may emerge as a competitor to Dubai as a regional business hub.

Abu Dhabi, though, is unlikely to become the new Dubai (leaving aside that many would argue that one Dubai is enough anyway). Neither will anywhere else in the region. Any goodbye even to a chastened Dubai will in fact be — in the very least — a long goodbye. Dubai's regional-hub role is indisputable and has been developed over a long period through the infrastructural investment detailed in this essay. Trade, its related logistics services, aviation and tourism have all held up better than real estate through the global economic crisis. Shipping has also started to recover. As the hub for a large region, and as a key point for transacting business with a physical and economic infrastructure that is unequalled in the Middle East and North Africa, if not wider, Dubai stands to benefit from any durable pick-up in the global economy and will then attempt to build on it.

To this end, there has been a shake-up in Dubai's ruling elite, decision making and power has been recentralized within government rather than within the state-linked companies, and there has been a return of an old guard that is uncontaminated by the boom's excesses. One of the most influential representatives of this group, Ahmad al-Tayer, the new head of DIFC, argues that the reigning strategy 'is to go back to our core business . . . which is that Dubai is a hub for trade, re-export and services' (quoted in Khalaf and Kerr, 2010). Accordingly, in mid-2010 the new Al-Maktoum International Airport opened the first of its five runways, for cargo operations only. The new airport is designed to have the capacity to handle 160 million passengers a year, which is that of Atlanta and Heathrow combined. Its main tenant, Emirates Airlines, the first of the so-called ‘super-connector’ airways that links Asia, Africa and Australasia through the Middle East to Europe and the US, continues to expand (Lohmann *et al*., 2009).

These shifts mean that Dubai will remain important for urban researchers, particularly those concerned with globalization and with the building and configuration of global or transnational cities after the crisis (Elsheshtawy, 2008). In addition, while the construction and real estate development sector remains strangely understudied in general (Haila, 2006), the great concentration of this industry’s development effort in Dubai specifically and the Gulf more broadly over the past years has resulted in refinements and innovations in big-site master planning, project management, infrastructure, construction and engineering techniques and even public transport (Dubai’s metro and tram lines, for example).

These all deserve further scrutiny, as does the issue of the real impacts of Dubai fever, which was highly contagious and spread by the real estate companies all over the broad region that Dubai spans, in effect widening the city-state’s sphere of influence. Emaar, Nakheel, DP World and others made enormous investments in existing and new real estate development and in transportation, trading, logistics and energy during the boom years. Emaar, for example, has over US $100 billion worth of projects in the Middle East, North Africa, the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Turkey and Indonesia, as well as in Canada, the US and the UK. Investors from other Gulf countries have followed suit. The influence on current and future urban development is potentially amplified by economic growth in Asia and Africa, and the consequent rise of a truly global middle class. Dubai’s regional functions and ambitions here arguably distinguish it from real estate-led growth of the kind that happened in Spain or Ireland, for example (Gardner, 2010).

In 2007 and 2008, Emaar billboards with a picture of the then Burj Dubai all over Delhi and other Indian cities read: ‘The world’s tallest building: the only thing higher is our dream for India’. The aspirations so implied and represented are important to understand and should not be discounted: indeed, the practices and conventions characterizing Dubai’s recent city building contribute significant aspects of the template for the current wave of global suburbanization, which is most marked — and least researched — in the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

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Résumé

Ce texte examine les effets de la crise économique mondiale sur Dubaï, en évaluant les implications pour le développement économique et urbain à venir, tant à Dubaï que dans sa sphère d'influence. L'essor immobilier entre 2003 et 2008 s'inscrit dans la stratégie de croissance de l'émirat. Celle-ci reflète l'ambition déjà ancienne de la famille Al Maktoum au pouvoir, qui vise à faire de l'État-cité une ville planétaire, s'appuyant sur des décennies d'investissements considérables dans l'infrastructure économique afin d'assurer le rôle de plaque tournante du commerce régional. Pendant les six années d'expansion, l'aménagement urbain a explosé en termes de processus et de constructions, les promoteurs soutenus par l'État empruntant massivement sur les marchés financier, et ayant conçu et bâti un ensemble extraordinaire de sites commerciaux, industriels, résidentiels et touristiques afin de faire face à l'accroissement prévu de la population dans un cadre de prospérité économique. La période d'essor s'est heurtée à la crise mondiale à partir de la fin 2008: ralentissement (voire arrêt) des constructions, valeur de l'immobilier divisée par deux, et entreprises détenues par l'État forcées de restructurer leurs finances pour répondre aux exigences de leurs créanciers. Une reprise durable de la croissance économique devrait inciter l'élite dirigeante de Dubaï à recentrer la ville dans son rôle de centre régional de service et de commerce grâce à des investissements importants dans les infrastructures aéronautiques, maritimes et logistiques. Même si l'aménagement immobilier n'apparaît plus comme une priorité économique, la construction urbaine réalisée à Dubaï reste une source d'inspiration pour la nouvelle vague de suburbanisation mondiale que connaissent le Moyen-Orient, l'Afrique et l'Asie.