Spaceship in the Desert
Conceptions of Abu Dhabi’s Masdar City

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“To look at computer-generated images of it, you might think it was a fantasy from a sci-fi comic. The sort I read as a boy,” Norman Foster of the London-based architecture office Foster + Partners states in describing their recent project of Masdar City in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). “But Masdar City, a university city and environmental technology park outside Abu Dhabi, is already being built.” Seeking to rely entirely on renewable energy sources, Masdar aims at becoming a clean technology cluster that will house approximately 40,000 residents, thereby contributing to the economic diversification of oil-rich Abu Dhabi. By investing in renewable energy technologies via its various operations—Masdar Power, Masdar Carbon and Masdar Capital—Masdar will ensure that Abu Dhabi remains a significant player in the energy industry, even when its oil wells run dry. The Masdar Institute, the energy-focused post-graduate research center that is set up and supervised by the Technology and Development Program (TDP) of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), currently operates in the only building amid the construction site of the eco-city.

Imaginary of the Future

While safeguarding Abu Dhabi’s position in the energy industry, Masdar may be physically and socially constructing an imaginary of the future within the present. That could explain why, after Hollywood celebrity Clive Owen visited the campus, his comments were framed under the title “Masdar looks like a city from the future: Owen” in the national newspaper Khaleej Times. Owen suggested that a sci-fi film be shot at the Masdar Institute. Another much celebrated comment regarding the futuristic aspects of the Masdar Institute came from a student named Laura who blogged about how being there felt like living in a spaceship in the middle of the desert. The people living on the island are not only brave; they have a reason why Laura’s blog features a comment from a former Masdar employee, celebrating an optimistic transformation: “Brave people living on the island, it will get better and better…”

People on the Island

The people living on the island are not only brave; they have also been selected. Hence the hands of Masdar inhabitants are tied when they discover that some students are asked to resign from the institution because they have not passed the newly implemented security clearance. When I pointed out to the president of the institute—himself an Iranian-American—that six students recently asked to resign shared the common denominator of being Shiites (four from Iran and two from Lebanon), he insisted that this was not, as I had assumed, a discriminatory protocol on the institute’s part. Instead, he tried to comfort me by saying that this is similar to the US policies adopted in regards to Arabs following 9/11, and that there was nothing that the institute can do. The president reassured environment. Like Noah’s ark, the spaceship speaks to a future that emerges from within an enclosed space. This could be the reason why Laura’s blog features a comment from a former Masdar employee, celebrating an optimistic transformation: “Brave people living on the island, it will get better and better…”

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me that I should think of the security agency as the CIA of the UAE. As much as the Masdar Institute may be considered a spaceship that by definition claims insularity, it is highly regulated by sociopolitical principles that are embedded within and without.

It is not surprising, then, to the brave people of the island that the institute’s kitchen staff receive 600 Dirham per month (roughly US $160) in exchange for roughly 200 hours of work, as is common practice in the UAE. When I asked Mohammed, a Bangladeshi man responsible for serving the president’s guests, if he knew why so many individuals and groups find this building worthy of a visit, he shook his head no. A professor in the institute had told him that solar panels provide energy to the campus. A few days later, an on-site architect criticized the conception of sustainability within these compounds: “How could sustainability truly be targeted when there is this little attention paid to human capital,” he pointed out. “Sustainability is also about claiming some sort of justice, and making sure that what we build leads this very young country towards a better direction. It is also about some kind of equality.”

**Testing Ground**

But there are also methodologies within the spaceship that are unique. The Masdar Institute inhabitants are brave because they are subjects within the experiment of building an eco-city, though, as one student emphasized, they are rarely acknowledged for this participation. While some students argued that it will take some time for the institute to grow and achieve its environmental aspirations, others expressed awe at the present facilities. A student who specialized in material science explained, for instance, how accessible his lab was in comparison to other labs he has heard about in Europe, and was proud to be part of an avant-garde testing ground in the Arabian Gulf. When he compared his experience at the institute with his tenure as a teaching assistant in Cairo, he was thankful for the amount of time he could spend on research. This past year he resided in an eco-friendly building that attempts to produce 30% of its energy consumption and comprises various energy efficiency mechanisms, ranging from smart appliances in dorm rooms to motion detectors or photovoltaic panels that produce electricity.

As much as they may regard their building as a spaceship, students did not refrain from criticism about its eco-friendliness. Some complained about how the lights turn on and off in the rooms, how water begins to run independently, and how the air conditioning force them to wear sweaters at all times. An on-site architect argued that the students have these problems because the Building Management System, which he considers to be “the control room of this ship,” needs further fine-tuning. However, I am not sure if the students’ cynicism stems from these organizational problems. It may instead be the discrepancy between practices inside and outside the building that generates disbelief in the ideals that Masdar claims to stand for. When I consulted an executive at Masdar Initiative about how he understands this seeming inconsistency, he told me that the project is a renewed attempt at resource management, and I should not necessarily frame it as environmentalism. When the claim to eco-friendliness is abandoned, the discrepancies between the inside and the outside are expected to be dissolved. That’s why I should not be surprised to see so many SUVs parked outside Masdar offices. Masdar City, as an ever-evolving semiotic entity, thereby remains a showcase for a bounded eco-friendliness, ascribed to an imaginary of the future.