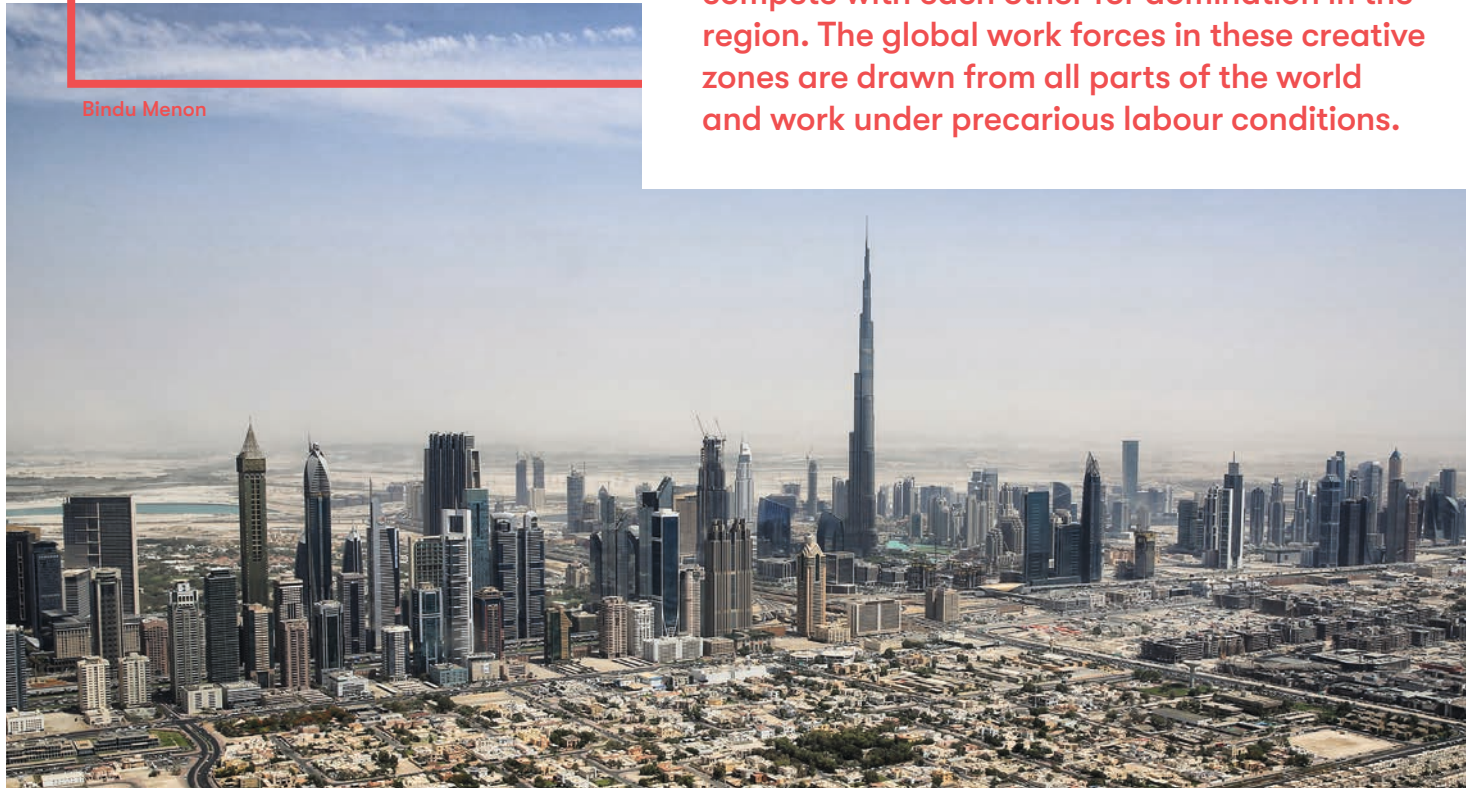


# Media free zones

Precarious labour and migrant vernaculars in Emirati cities

Transnational finance capital in the media sector has been exploring world locations with lower labour rates and less-regulatory environments that would allow free movement of capital. The petro-modernist cities of the United Arab Emirates have emerged as key sites in this search. Free zones for media production in Dubai, Ras Al Khaimah, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah compete with each other for domination in the region. The global work forces in these creative zones are drawn from all parts of the world and work under precarious labour conditions.

Bindu Menon



Skyline of Downtown Dubai with Burj Khalifa from a Helicopter. © Tim Reckmann on Wikimedia Commons.

Dubai and other Emirati cities are examples of the 'high modernist cities', catalysed by a petro dollar economy since the 1950s, and distinguished by the fact that their growth was not organic, but planned entirely by architects. In their post-liberalisation drive towards becoming global mega cities that cater to a transnational middleclass and its global imaginations, the urban gulf landscape has indeed produced petro-modernist cities par excellence. Dubai has in particular emerged as a spectacular media city, with its incorporation of everyday media technologies and embedded media practices in its infrastructure. This allows us to move towards a larger experience of media as a specific experience of modern social life that emerges through a complex process of co-constitution between architectural structures and urban territories. Media technologies form a significant part of the Gulf city's urban infrastructure, shaping its everyday life, popular perceptions of space, environment and representations of the city. The Gulf cities are inseparable from their information superhighways, display boards, art exhibitions, huge installations in public spaces, spectacles of city tours, the architectural wonders of Burj Khalifa, opera and jazz clubs, Bollywood Tours and Filipino concerts.

The UAE's 'Media free zones' compete with other major media capitals of the contemporary world. The UAE government offers subsidized facilities, tax incentives, and labour concessions to such zones that are designed to nurture local capacity and lure producers away from other locales, such as Hollywood. With a host of ancillary services, production facilities, broadcast facilities and changes in policy discourse on creative economies, there is much competition among such cities in their aspirations to become media capitals. In her insightful work on special economic zones of production as architectural units of extra statecraft, Keller Easterling traces the genealogy of the zones as temporary sub optimal economic instruments that absorbed domestic economies into the enclave and spread across the world in the 1970s. The

1970s zone germinated into a new form in the Middle East, particularly Dubai; new campuses developed over the decade, such as Dubai Knowledge City, Dubai Health City, Dubai Media City, and Dubai International Finance Centre. The zones merge both industrial and knowledge economies, allowing for a smooth movement of transnational finance capital and a reservoir of spatial products that migrate around the world, a model that is now central to the global urban imagination.

It is evident that the state has moved from the 'welfare state' model to the commodification of the city, in which 'urban space' has become a commodity and is thus systematically exploited for the primary purpose of profitmaking. The organisation of a city space such as the 'Media City' takes this logic one step further. This represents the ultimate vision of the financialisation of the city, a process by which the city itself is specifically and systematically engineered and designed by finance with the sole and explicit aim of generating profits.

## Unorganised production by migrants

Yet, are these cities to be read only as terminator cities? While these are clearly economies that emerge in the context of a globalised political economy of media production, it is incumbent upon us to not lose sight of the relationship between these locales and the deep histories of migration. It is significant to explore the networks that are built in contemporary processes of border crossings, global division of labour, cultural and economic exchange in late capitalism. The intercultural and unorganised production by migrants stands almost as an antithesis to the organised 'media city'. I argue that the crucial link between this amateur representational economy and the other end of this spectrum, the emergence of immaterial labour in special free zones of media production like the 'Dubai Media City', is the precariat that exists in both.

Most of the migrant media productions – music videos, vlogs, short narrative films and documentaries – are embedded in cyber aesthetics. These productions cast the migrant life outside the dominant paradigm of utilitarian economism, addressing migrants as complex social beings and inhabitants of an emotional landscape of migration. The 'Gulf city' emerges as the site of both utopian and dystopian imaginations. On one end of the spectrum is Dubai's multilingual multi-ethnic vlog community, in which active participants narrate migrant experiences and act as self-help guides to leading a migrant life in Dubai. They offer advice about job searches, travel, shopping, lifestyle, fitness, cooking, investments and religious rituals. A widely accepted definition of self-help encompasses "legally permissible conduct that individuals undertake absent the compulsion of law and without the assistance of a government official in efforts to prevent or remedy a legal wrong". The scope of self-help consists in behaviour that is both freely undertaken, without the assistance of the state, and is in order to prevent or cure a rights violation.

How do we make sense of such voluntary acts and their visual registers? How does one tie what these videos put forth to a broader civic culture in Dubai?

Legally, most of the countries in the Gulf Council region have a hierarchical structure, with citizenship limited to 'native' Arabs, thus making the legal and cultural lives of immigrants and Arab Communities mutually exclusive domains. The exploitative guest worker system and racialized economic hierarchy in which, for example, Indians and Africans are placed 'below' all others is shown to contribute to this profound experience of alienation for the immigrant in the Gulf. The kafala system coalesces resident permits with specific employment contracts, which require a national resident or company to act as sponsor. The system thus keeps the guest worker an economic dependant, or in some cases an elite non-citizen. In the absence of any form of legal citizenship, anthropologists

argue that the Emirati states offer a substitute form of consumer citizenship to its residents.

Recognition of the absence of legal citizenship frames the moral compulsion of self-help videos. Cultures of improvement videos shift their focus from the individual and productivist ideas of self-improvement to more collective and consumerist conceptions. I am compelled to read these visual narratives as traces of the development of an ideal that connected 'self-improvement' and citizenship as a response to the particular conditions of late capitalist neo liberal economy, limited presence of a welfare state-government, and a limited franchise. It can be understood as a key site of contemporary popular ideas of citizenship in Dubai.

## An undercurrent of subnationalisms

The media production houses in these media zones reflect the status of Gulf cities as essentially migrant cities. The zones house studios, freelance services, television channels, distribution services, graphic design studios and other media enterprises owned by entrepreneurs of Indian, Chinese, Egyptian, Saudi Arabian, Palestinian and Pakistani descent, and employing global media work forces. Both in the free zones of media production, and the unorganised yet market oriented creative labour in the Emirati cities, we find a collision of languages, genres, and technologies. They recalibrate the city space and possibilities of migratory aesthetics across a heterogeneity of media forms. Saskia Sassen, in a seminal essay that tries to untangle the knots of various processes involved in globalisation, points towards an almost subterranean undercurrent of subnationalisms in the deep recesses of the global sites. While remaining an integral part of global lateral networks, knowingly or unknowingly, the media forms are both evidence of subterranean subnationalisms at global sites like Dubai, yet continue to be deeply attached to locality, and attempt a resuscitation of migratory networks and their deep histories.

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## Notes

- 1 See Curtin, M. & Sanson, K. 2016. *Precarious creativity: Global media, local labor*. University of California Press., p.336.
- 2 Easterling, K. 2014. *Extrastatecraft: the power of infrastructure space*. Verso Books.
- 3 Analysing the emergence of 'Fantasy Film cities' that combine profit and pleasure in cities of India, Shanti Kumar argues that they claim a share in the transnational media production sphere and imagine a post-colonial alternative to Hollywood-centred models of profit and pleasure. Kumar, S. 2006. 'Mapping Tollywood: The Cultural Geography of "Ramoji Film City" in Hyderabad', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 23(2):129-138.
- 4 Precarity and an increase in job insecurity is seen as an important feature of work and life. Perhaps present in its strongest and most violent form in the context of the temporary labour migration to the Gulf States. Though overbearing and oppressive it is also seen as creating new conditions of permissibility and accessibility and generative of new political subjectivities; see Standing, G. 2016. *The precariat: The new dangerous class*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- 5 Brandon, D.I. et al. 1984. 'Self-Help: Extrajudicial Rights, Privileges and Remedies in Contemporary American Society', *Vanderbilt Law Review* 37(4):845.
- 6 The kafala system monitors migrant labourers, working primarily in the construction and domestic sectors, in Lebanon, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.
- 7 Sassen, S. 2003. 'Globalization or denationalization?', *Review of International Political Economy* 10(1):1-22