

MASDAR CITY: THE POLITICS OF UTOPIAN ECO-DEVELOPMENT IN THE U.A.E.

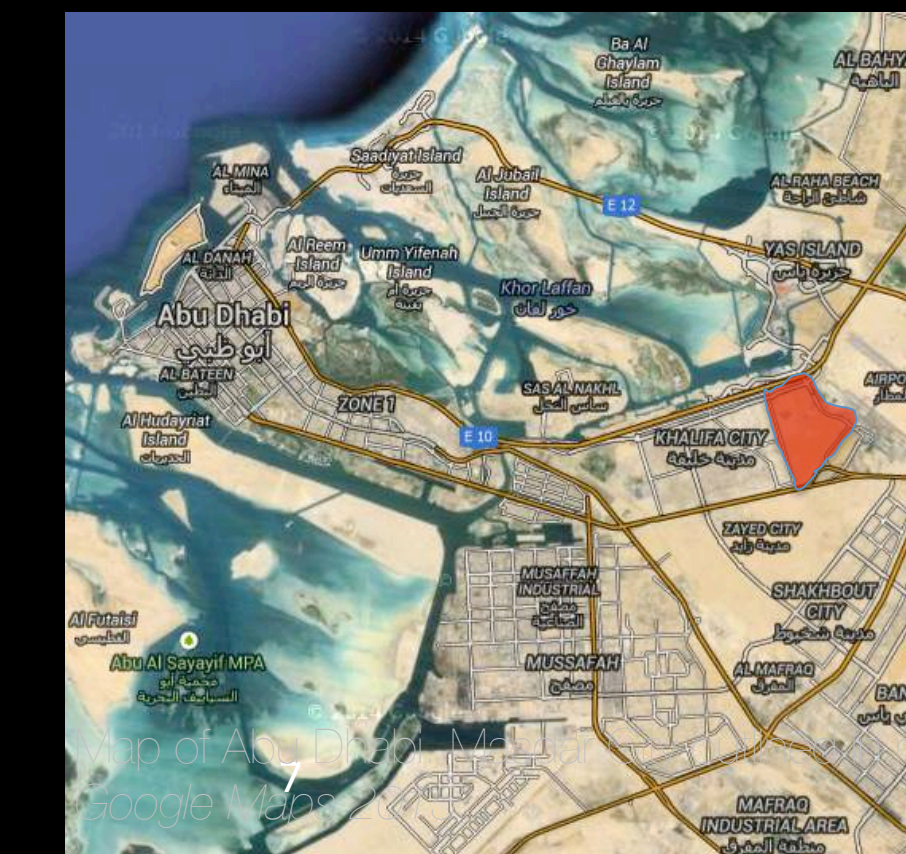
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A "GREENPRINT" FOR SUSTAINABLE CITIES OF THE FUTURE

- Masdar City is a 6km² master-planned, carbon-neutral "city" outside of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates
- \$18B project, to be completed in 2030
- home to 40k residents + 50k commuters
- Anchored around the Masdar Institute for Science and Technology, an MIT-sponsored sustainability grad school
- Partnerships with clean tech businesses: Siemens, GE, Mitsubishi
- Designed by Norman Foster



ABU DHABI: AN ASPIRING GLOBAL CITY



Map of Abu Dhabi. Masdar City outlined in Red. Google Maps 2015.

Sheikh Khalifa's Plan Abu Dhabi 2030 stresses goals to become a 'world class city' built around a 'sustainable knowledge economy'

→ diversification away from oil and gas industries

Mission of the Masdar Initiative:
"To make [AD] the preeminent source of renewable energy knowledge, development and implementation, and the world's benchmark for sustainable development"

SPECTACULAR URBANISM AS DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Masdar fits into broader trend of megaproject development in Gulf cities (i.e.: Dubai, Doha), which serve to:

- Attract international business and tourism (economic diversification)
- Brand as global city
- Transfer oil wealth from state to citizen (builds political legitimacy)



CURRENT PROGRESS

→ essentially a grad school campus & business HQs. ~300 students live there.



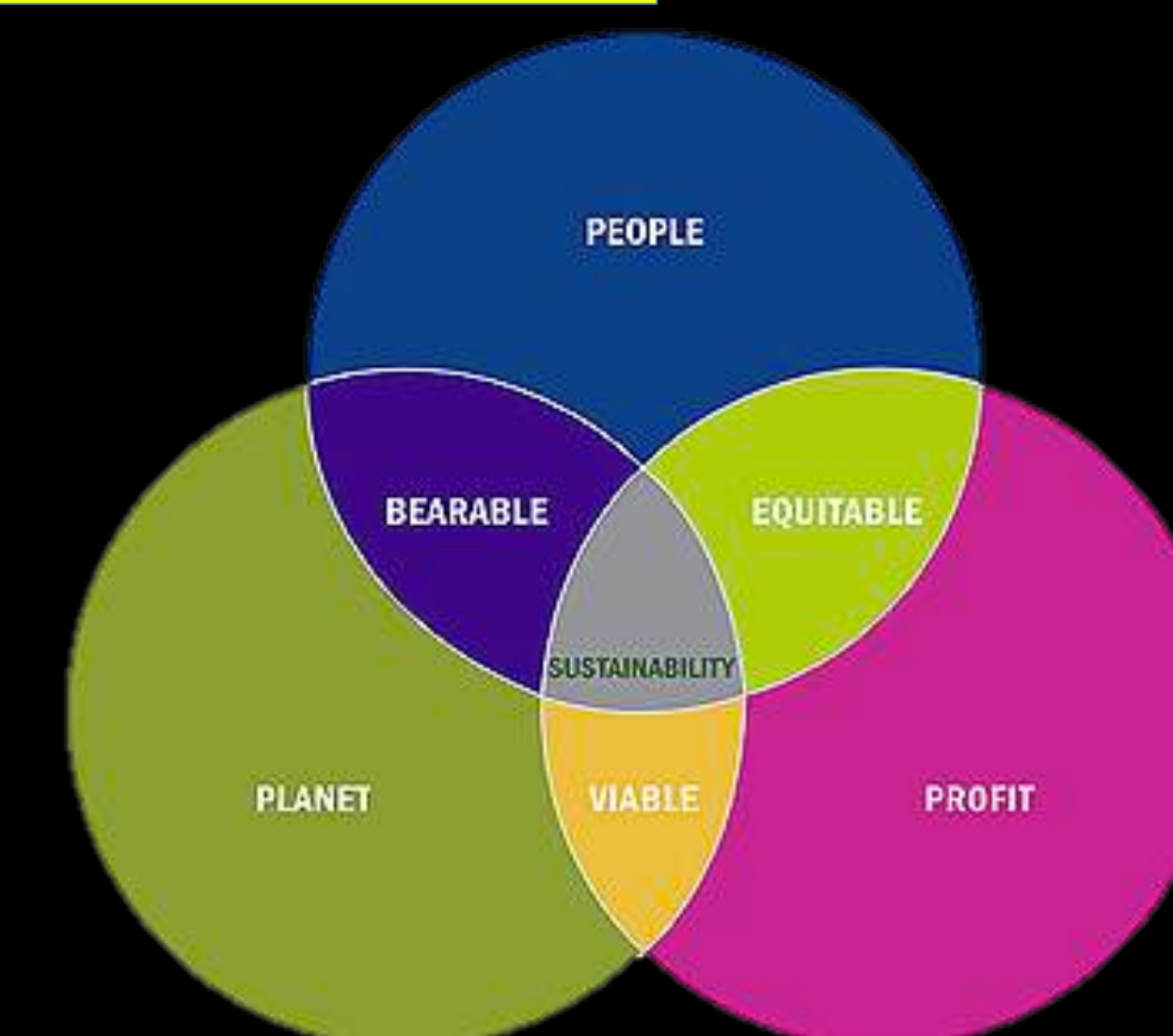
SUSTAINABILITY AT MASDAR

Masdar's take on the triple bottom line:

- "Carbon-neutral" solar panels everywhere (10MW onsite, 100MW@Shams); "best practice" in green building and design to minimize emissions
- "high quality of life" will eventually offer luxury apartments in "pedestrian friendly" envt; open space; options for shopping, dining; "maximized convenience"
- "profitable" situated in a Free Economic Zone (FEZ) offering generous incentives to foreign business; city as showroom

CRITIQUE OF MASDAR'S APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

- (1) Ecological and economic concerns are emphasized at the expense of equity/social justice
 - Climate change and environmental degradation presented as technical problems solvable through scientific innovation, rather than requiring tough political trade-offs and structural change (Harvey 1996)
 - Typical of triple bottom line approach to sustainability (Gunder 2006)
- (2) Reproduces neoliberal economies and socio-spatial segregation (especially as FEZ)
 - Functions as an "ecological enclave" for knowledge workers and the creative class
 - Dependent on the same practices of migrant labor exploitation and "graduated sovereignty" as the rest of Abu Dhabi (see Ong 2006)
- (3) Presents a "post-political" view of sustainability in which (decarbonized) capitalism is seen as the only hope for our collective future (Swyngedouw 2006; Žižek 2011)



The triple bottom line model of sustainability

MASDAR CITY AS "CONSPICUOUS ECO-URBANISM"



- "Conspicuous" because it's meant to be seen on int'l stage
- strong ties between "green" and "globally recognized" images
- discourse of sustainability lends legitimacy & progressivity to nondemocratic regimes

"the supposedly objective good of protecting the environment is precisely what makes [sustainability] so powerful — it is a convenient tool for deflecting criticism of a project that outside observers would otherwise easily target as retrogressive"

-Koch (2013) on sustainable development in Qatar

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