

Spaceship in the Desert: Energy, Climate Change, and Urban Design in Abu Dhabi

Gökçe Günel

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Gökçe Günel's *Spaceship in the Desert* is the fascinating story of a “zero-carbon eco-city” that demonstrates the stark difference between vision and reality.

Masdar City, located in the UAE capital of Abu Dhabi, was marketed as “the city of the future and the role model for the world” when it opened in 2006. It was envisioned as a place where the focus would be on renewable energy and clean technology, recognizing the environmental challenge of climate change.

Günel explores the development of this “spaceship in the desert,” from its ambitious master plan to its vanguard architecture to its partial abandonment after the 2008 recession. Günel observed the city’s development and interviewed researchers at the Masdar Institute, which encouraged international corporations to work with research faculty on joint clean technology projects.

The book is detailed in covering Masdar City’s futuristic components, like an electric, automated personal rapid transit (PRT) system developed to provide “private, on-demand, nonstop transportation between any two points on a network” that connected the entire city but that languished, half-completed. Still, descriptions and photos of the PRT are nothing if not tantalizing evidence of a creative future solution to mass transit, representing both “hopefulness and anxiety.”

Günel’s first-hand reportage is insightful and objective. She often refers to the complexities of developing such a city, discussing both its assets and liabilities. Though in the end Masdar City never became the hoped-for eco-city, it “will become a special economic zone for renewable energy and clean technology companies.” Plans for a hotel, a mall, and “eco-villas” are underway. Günel is optimistic that the Masdar Institute will continue its important work, and that Masdar City will remain a “city of possibilities.”

BARRY SILVERSTEIN (March/April 2019)

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