

Abu Dhabi: High Culture and Hard Labor

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ACROSS a narrow sea channel from Abu Dhabi's sleek towers, construction on Saadiyat Island is proceeding at a pace that's extreme even by the standards of this Persian Gulf boomtown.

Planned as the mother of all luxury property developments, Saadiyat's extraordinary offer to the buyers of its opulent villas is that they will be able to stroll to the Guggenheim Museum, the Louvre and a new national museum partnered with the British Museum. A clutch of lustrous architects — Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel, Zaha Hadid, Rafael Viñoly and Norman Foster — have been lured with princely sums to design these buildings. New York University, where I am on the faculty, will join the museums when its satellite campus opens later this year. But there is a darker story behind the shiny facades of these temples to culture, arts and ideas.

On Saadiyat, and throughout the gleaming cityscapes of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the construction work force is almost entirely made up of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi Sri Lankan and Nepalese migrant laborers. Bound to an employer by the kafala sponsorship system, they arrive heavily indebted from recruitment and transit fees, only to find that their gulf dream has been a mirage. Typically, in the United Arab Emirates, the sponsoring employer takes their passports, houses the workers in substandard labor camps, pays much less than they were promised and enforces a punishing regimen under the desert sun.

In its 2006 report "Building Towers, Cheating Workers," [\[1\]](#) Human Rights Watch issued the first of its several critiques of the kafala system. The official response has been mixed: some reforms have been made to labor law, but representatives from Human Rights Watch have been barred from entry, and almost a thousand migrants have died in neighboring Qatar while building infrastructure for the 2022 World Cup.

Saadiyat is supposed to be a model exception. The government's Tourism Development and Investment Corporation has installed a well-equipped worker village (though it still has the feel of a detention camp), along with employment policies that look good on paper. But the policies are not adequately enforced. Employers are supposed to pay off their workers' recruitment fees, though very few do, and many contractors house their workers more cheaply in poor facilities elsewhere. Every independent investigator who has visited these off-island locations has turned up multiple violations of the employment codes.

Earlier this month, I interviewed workers employed on Saadiyat projects, accompanied by my colleagues from Gulf Labor, a coalition of artists and writers convened three years ago to persuade the Guggenheim and the Louvre to raise labor standards. Gulf Labor has led an international boycott of the museum's Abu Dhabi branch by more than 1,800 artists, writers, curators and gallery owners — many of them respected names whose work the Guggenheim would like to acquire for its Saadiyat collection.

On our trips through the archipelago of labor camps that encircles Abu Dhabi and Dubai, we stopped at a makeshift Punjabi restaurant in the industrial area known as Al Quoz. There, in the early

morning hours, we spoke with a number of workers including one named Ganesh, who has worked on buildings for N.Y.U. and the Louvre. Slightly built with a dazzling smile, he switched between Hindi and English to explain his predicament. Owed a year's wages by the recruitment company that brought him from Nepal, he is unable to leave the U.A.E., more than 10 years later, because his sponsor has his passport (and his back pay). His labor visa has expired, and he is surviving on canteen credit and illegal work stints.

Paying off recruitment debts consumed his first two years of hard labor in the U.A.E. During that time, his family's subsistence farm in the Himalaya foothills had been at his creditor's disposal. "Three or four out of 10 lose their land," he said, "when they can't repay on time." His next decade in the U.A.E. was spent scratching out thin remittances to send to his wife and children. On some work projects, he was housed three hours from the construction site. To put in a mandatory 12-hour shift, "I had to wake up at 4 a.m.," he said, "and then had to cook my dinner after I returned at 10 p.m."

Last month, a Gulf Labor offshoot (the Global Ultra Luxury Faction) occupied the Guggenheim Museum in New York, protesting labor conditions in Abu Dhabi. In response, the museum's director, Richard Armstrong, claimed that the Guggenheim's Abu Dhabi expansion, designed by Mr. Gehry, is not yet under construction. Yet the extensive foundation pilings and much of the surrounding infrastructure have already been laid.

It's not too late for the museum to break with the practices that have built the Louvre and N.Y.U. And there is still time for Mr. Gehry to counter the ugly implications of Zaha Hadid's recent remarks after the deaths in Qatar, where she designed Al Wakrah stadium. "I have nothing to do with the workers," she said. "It's not my duty as an architect to look at it."

The U.A.E. is hardly alone in its dependence on tragically underpaid and ill-treated migrant workers. Every developed, and fast-developing, country has its own record of shame. But in the Persian Gulf States, the lavish lifestyle of a minority composed of citizens and corporate expats is maintained by a vast majority that functions as a servant class.

If liberal cultural and educational institutions are to operate with any integrity in that environment, they must insist on a change of the rules: abolish the recruitment debt system, pay a living wage, allow workers to change employers at will and legalize the right to collective bargaining. Otherwise, their gulf paymasters will go on cherry-picking from the globalization menu — Lamborghinis, credit default swaps, liberal arts degrees, blockbuster exhibitions — while spurning the social contract that protects basic human rights.

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P.S.

* NYT. MARCH 28, 2014:

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/29/opinion/high-culture-and-hard-labor.html?_r=1

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Gulf Labor.

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2006/11/11/building-towers-cheating-workers-0>