

Why no one seems to have a map of tomorrow's Dubai



Dubai is not a city - it is a vision and an ambition. And you can't capture vision and ambition on a map.

"There will soon be 50 new hotels coming up along this stretch of the road," a Dubai journalist told me pointing at the then-sparsely populated Sheikh Zayed Road, from the window of a room at one of the higher floors of the Fairmont Dubai. That was in September 2003 when, as a foreign financial journalist, I was invited to cover the Annual Meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group. "Will there be enough visitors to justify so many new hotels," I'd wondered then. "Of course, this is Dubai," came the response.

I can't claim to have fully grasped the import of that comment then, but the events at the IMF and WB meetings over the next couple of days surely put that response in perspective. On the following two days, Dubai officials showcased the emirate's focus on manufacturing, finance and tourism. They dazzled the audience by announcing that it was possible to open a business in a free zone in under three hours, highlighting the success of the cluster

strategy embodied in Dubai Internet City and Dubai Media City, among others. I was already in love with the city and its ambition before I finally moved to Dubai in 2005.

In 2006, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum became the Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE, and Ruler of Dubai. The architect-in-chief of present-day Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed's vision and ambition gave the emirate new wings. As the Editor of a business magazine, I would regularly receive media announcements about new projects including islands, residential and commercial properties, new government departments, and colossal financial investments. The numbers kept getting bigger, often forcing us to check back with the issuing body to ensure that a 'zero' hadn't been inadvertently added to a project's investment size. So overwhelming was the scale of those announcements that, for us, it was impossible to fully capture the grand vision of Dubai let alone understand it. We would often wonder if someone had a map that plotted future projects to give an idea of what tomorrow's Dubai would look like.

Then came the global financial crisis of 2008-09, exposing the dark side of accelerated growth. They say that when the US sneezes, the rest of the world catches a cold. In 2008, the US discovered its malignant financial tumour, and the pain of the therapy impacted economies far and wide, including Dubai's. But what looked like an impossible mountain to climb during the crash of 2008 proved to be a mere speedbump. In its inimitable style, the emirate continued on its growth path with world-beating developments like the Dubai Mall, the Dubai Metro and FlyDubai airline becoming a reality in 2009.

The emirate continued to bedazzle its fans and naysayers alike by making grander announcements and then delivering them in style, with the Burj Khalifa opening its doors in 2010. The nine years since then have been nothing short of amazing, with the operational launch of the Al Maktoum International Airport, the formation of the UAE Space Agency and the announcement of the Mars probe named Hope, and the inauguration of the Dubai Water Canal, the Dubai Safari Park and the Dubai Frame, among others.

Now, with Dubai readying itself at a rapid pace to host Expo 2020 next year, the questions are back: Will there be enough buyers or tourists or whatever to meet the ambitious new projects? Will Dubai economy be able to cope after the 25 million visitors leave? The answer, if I may borrow my peer's quip, is: Of course, this is Dubai. Last time I checked, there were 263 properties listed as hotels and hotel apartments on Sheikh Zayed Road - several times more than the 50 I thought in 2003 were a bit much. Now I no longer wonder if someone has a map of future Dubai. For, Dubai is not a city - it is a vision and an ambition. And you can't capture vision and ambition on a map.