

BOOK

Dubai High

Michael Schindhelm's year in charge of the Gulf city's cultural life inspires a harrowing tale, finds Edwin Heathcote

Dubai has become a good gag, the most perfectly formed paradigm of boom and bust, its glassy skyline a spiky warning of how it can all go wrong if you try to build an economy on little more than speculation. Like all bubbles, there was a moment when Dubai seemed to present an opportunity, a chance to see what a new type of city could do. There was a sense that its summary dismissal by so many was a case of snobbery, of the West's incessant assertion of the supremacy of its own established model as the only way that cities

could ever get built. Dubai High is the story of why the cynics, unfortunately, were right.

It is written by Michael Schindhelm, a German intellectual who has been the director of Berlin opera houses and translated Gogol and Chekhov. He also studied quantum chemistry in the Soviet Union (and in the 1980s worked in the East Berlin Academy of Science's department of theoretical chemistry with Angela Merkel) and has worked in film and television. In 2007 Schindhelm took the post of cultural director of the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority. If this body sounds like an oxymoron, that's because it was. The book is the diary of a year in Schindhelm's

career that presumably will not feature highly on his otherwise astonishing CV.

It is supposed to be part fictionalised but, apart from the names, which have been changed, at no point does this book read like fiction. Schindhelm begins with high hopes for the potential of a cultural desert to develop a coherent, pioneering policy and an international arts complex. That is the high point. The following story is a woeful tale of frustration, disappointment and disbelief, as competing parties begin to vie for the site, for the services of superstar architects and for the ear, and wallets, of the Emirati ruling family who are the de facto backers of every major project. There is

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no management structure and there are no decisions. The narrator (whose job description changes by the week) is given only a skeleton staff and can only guess at the wrangling that is going on as strings are pulled and briefs change. The extraordinary ambition of the cultural centre is whittled away, first to a temporary, possibly floating, structure that could accommodate events until the big decisions are taken, and then finally, in the narrator's one concrete achievement, to an exhibition of Arabian portrait photographs in the lobby of what appears to be a semi-deserted office building. This is later trashed to leave a legacy of precisely nothing.

The cast of characters is familiar: feckless Emiratis; scheming interlopers; arrogant shyster consultants; money-hungry, ignorant developers; useless individuals trying to make careers in the Gulf because they've failed elsewhere ... The list is clichéd but also rings true. The most instantly recognisable (you could say poorly fictionalised) character is the international superstar architect Bouman: a tall, slender, European intellectual who pops up at stellar parties and modest openings with his big plans for the Gulf. It can only be Rem Koolhaas, whose extraordinary, occasionally visionary, occasionally bananas Gulf schemes were frustrated in the extreme. That it was Rem himself who brought this book to my attention shows that he feels the book captures the strange, elegiac sense of lost opportunity that Dubai represents.

It would be easy to describe the book as Kafkaesque: the impenetrable layers of administration, the all-but-invisible rulers, the anonymous offices and the vague sense that any moment could be the beginning of the end pervade the book. But ultimately it's only culture. No one's life was threatened; everyone moved on to different jobs. Dubai is still there and Abu Dhabi still bankrolls it. It is an intriguing episode and it looks destined to remain a parable of our time.

Left
Dubai's Sheikh Zayed Road – home to the Burj Khalifa and the less celebrated Dubai Culture and Arts Authority

