

Art enterprise

Cultural Klondike exposed

Dubai aimed to rival Abu Dhabi as a cultural centre: this is why it did not happen

This is a very funny book by an outrageously talented man (scientist, novelist, librettist, former director general of Berlin's three opera houses) who wasted a chunk of his life between 2007 and 2009 trying to set up a lavish cultural centre in Dubai at the behest of its ruler. It has not been a complete waste, though, because it has led to this unique account of that frenzied period, starting with Abu Dhabi's announcement that it intended to create the greatest cluster of museums outside the western world, and ending with the 2008 financial crisis, during which western museum directors, business consultants, impresarios, hucksters and opportunists descended on the Gulf in a sort of cultural Klondike.

Most people who leave the service of Gulf organisations have signed fierce confidentiality agreements, but Schindhelm is a maverick who writes freely about his experiences. Only the actual names are suppressed. Easily recognisable personalities such as Thomas Krens ("the American museum-chain representative") and the directors of the Berlin, Dresden and Bavarian state museums ("the generals") walk across this stage. Dominating it is "The Boss" (Omar bin Sulaiman, head of the Dubai International Financial Centre, deposed after the 2008 crash), whom Schindhelm is always trying to meet in order to get a decision out of him. For very soon he realises that the whole



Frustrated but feisty: Michael Schindhelm

project is on shifting sands: nothing is decided, no money has been voted, and indeed, early on he is treated to the presentation by a figure who is clearly Sheikh Majed al-Sabah, the Kuwaiti prince of luxury shopping, for a rival proposal on the same stretch of land: 85% shopping and dining, 15% culture, "to a collage of sound, the likes of which you might expect if Brian Eno had converted to Sufism". Not to worry, says his Emirati colleague: "The idea of planning several competitive projects on the same plot of land seems unusual from a Western perspective, but people have a different approach here."

Schindhelm goes on to reflect on the fabric of government: "To my mind, the

problem here is not so much the lack of freedom to create, but the hierarchy. It's an absolute monarchy with nothing so simple as one person ruling absolutely; rather, it's an uncontrolled, shifting power base within a royal household. No one seems to have the final word."

The proposed cultural complex, continually changing shape, is a by-blow of the property company he calls Al Adheem (the All Glorious), and although it has the ruler's blessing, it is not one of his pet projects and so lacks real substance. Schindhelm spends months questing for his remit in the creation of Theatre Land, Heritage Village, Global Art World and Culture Metropolis. Then he gets this bombshell from his colleague: "'The financing for the whole project is still up in the air.' I ask him

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what he means exactly by 'the whole project'. 'Culture', comes the reply."

In its baldness, this goes to the nub of the issue. What cultural offering would in fact be indispensable? The one achievement he actually clocks up is, in fact, properly rooted in the region, an exhibition of

1890s photographs of Bedouin, the earliest in existence.

In the end, nothing comes of all the grand plans for which he had been hired, and the "generals" also give up on their World Museum project when they realise that "The Boss" considers the land on which it would be built sufficient contribution; everything else would be paid for by the German taxpayer or business.

Schindhelm is furious and embarrassed, but eventually he seems to think that maybe this failure might not be such a bad thing: "Dubai's mass importation of the drawings, blueprints, forms, textiles and colours of Western cultures make it a Babylon of global architecture, fashion, technology and design. They might as well have been imported from the moon for all the cultural relevance they bear to the people expected to consume and live among these things."

Against that, he concludes with an approving description of the opening of what is clearly the Flying House, a centre for art created by the Emirates' most senior artist, Hassan Sharif: "So things have actually worked out for the first non-commercial public art space in the city. And without the help of a Cultural Council. Three hundred square metres of freedom on the beach. Until further notice." ■

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■ **Dubai High: a Culture Trip**
Michael Schindhelm
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