

Dubai High: A Culture Trip

Michael Schindhelm

Photographs by Aurore Belkin

London: Arabian Publishing, 2011. 240 pp. Hardback, jacketed. 43 b/w photographs. £25.00.

ISBN 978-0-958894-7-9

LOVE IT OR HATE IT, Dubai rarely fails to provoke an opinion and never more so than when discussed in the context of the arts. The perceived lack of cultural life in the Gulf's erstwhile shiniest star came under scrutiny during the emirate's rampant economic boom, and eventually the mud stuck. Stung by the criticism, Dubai's rulers sprang into action. It was time to "do" culture, and applying the same methodology used to build their highways and condominiums, they bought expertise from outside. So it was that in 2007 Michael Schindhelm, then director of Berlin's Stiftung Oper, the world's largest opera group, was recruited to advise the Dubai government on the establishment of an opera house and other cultural facilities.

Dubai High: A Culture Trip, is Schindhelm's partly fictionalized account of his experiences. His story was first told in German and entitled *Dubai Speed* but, thanks to its skilful editor, Sharon Sharpe, this racy and amusing English version does not read like a translation. It is an intriguing tale of his two years there, a time that ended in failure. The Zaha Hadid-designed opera house planned for Khor Dubai remains "on hold" – the customary Gulf euphemism for cancelled – and the ambitious cultural infrastructure that Schindhelm was charged with helping deliver never left the drawing-board, a victim of economic recession and capricious local politics. His professional journey prompts a host of searching questions, not least the wisdom and validity of grafting an alien art scene onto an existing culture. It also raises wider issues surrounding the ability of the UAE to set itself up as a truly international hub for the arts.

From the outset Schindhelm faced an uphill struggle, one arguably hampered by his own limited knowledge of the region and the nature of Dubai's conflictual business culture. Yet he clearly did not lack the desire to learn and he relates with disarming frankness his attempts to understand the local context. There's no whingeing here, no apportioning of blame. Instead, Schindhelm calmly describes the inaccessibility and incompetence of key staff members, their lack of understanding of what art is about, and their obsession with superlatives. He recalls with ironic humour his attempts to persuade those in charge that the vast proposed auditorium could not work acoustically for opera – but no-one was interested in anything other than its size. The absurdly overblown projections on audience numbers and income, the whimsical changes in policy and random nature of decision-making all conjure an image more akin to the court of Mad King Ludwig of Bavaria than a 21st-century nation striving for artistic credibility.

Within a few months Schindhelm could see the writing on the wall. At one point Dubai's ruler, Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, had been promised no fewer than seventy-two new cultural facilities, all up for competitive tender. It was a recipe for disaster. I was living and working in Dubai during late 2008 and recall the increasingly chaotic climate of the time. According to Schindhelm, a few months earlier he was beset by a "blizzard of submissions" from "clueless developers", yet within weeks Dubai's property bubble had burst and the market was in meltdown. Because his arts portfolio was treated by the authorities as a real estate project rather than a cultural endeavour, it was effectively doomed.

Around the time of Schindhelm's departure from Dubai in 2009 the cold wind of the global downturn was blowing as keenly there as anywhere and project after project was scrapped. Little has changed since, and whilst there's not exactly tumbleweed blowing down the Shaikh Zayed Expressway, the city crafted from smoke and mirrors is a chastened place. Dreams born of the old hubris have gradually been replaced by signs that a more balanced and mature Dubai might be emerging from the maelstrom of two years ago. Interestingly, certain aspects of the emergent arts are in good health. Dubai now has a thriving and surprisingly innovative gallery scene – in which, tellingly, the authorities are largely irrelevant – and Art Dubai remains the most respected art fair of its type within the Arab

world, despite the crass bankrolling attempts of the would-be pretender down the road, Abu Dhabi Art.

Schindhelm should draw comfort from these developments, which serve to endorse his core point that the arts need time, nurture and, most importantly, freedom, to take root and flourish. This is clearly going to be difficult to achieve in a fiefdom controlled by an unaccountable elite that views the arts primarily as extra bait in the quest for more tourism income. *Dubai High* should therefore be required reading for the functionaries working in neighbouring Abu Dhabi, where high-profile arts projects are already showing signs of unravelling, and in Qatar, where a more considered and thoughtful approach to the arts is underway.

Yet this highly readable and insightful book raises fundamental questions of interest not just to those building culture in the Gulf but to all of us. What are the arts for? How can foreign art forms be made interesting and relevant to new audiences? Answers came there none from Schindhelm's employers, but that doesn't mean to say that questions such as these should not be asked again and again. Meanwhile, Schindhelm delivers a pithy verdict on Dubai. "People are drawn here to earn and spend," he writes. "They come to consume and, in the process, end up being consumed." Dubai may have picked up Schindhelm, chewed him and spat him out, but this was a learning curve all round and some have clearly ended up wiser than others.

James Parry