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A SATELLITE

TEXT + IMAGES LISA REINISCH

خورفكان



When discussing Khor Fakkan it is for one of three things: as an enclave of Sharjah, surrounded by Fujairah; or as the region's only natural deep-sea port.

However, there is a fourth point of interest, which even fewer people are aware of: the mosque depicted on the back of the five dirham note. The almost 200-year-old Salem Al Mutawa Mosque, is located in Khor Fakkan.

Mohamed grew up near that mosque, in the area closest to the port, now simply referred to as Al Dhah (The East). This is the oldest part of town and even though it is right on the otherwise well-maintained Corniche, it has fallen into astonishing disrepair. Many of the original houses were bulldozed to make room for new developments. Sharjah's Directorate of Heritage is, thankfully, restoring the houses that remain.

My grandfather came here from Al Dhahra, in Abu Dhabi, says Mohamed. It has always been a small, tightly knit community. Everyone knows everyone. There are no secrets. This is neither good nor bad. It is just what it is.

Like other pioneering artists of his generation, Mohamed started out as a cartoonist for local media. In the 1980s, he became part of a group of artists around Hassan Sharif, later known as The Group of Five (also including Mohammed Kazem, Abdulrah Al Saadi and Hassan Sharif), who were experimenting with conceptual art and organizing the UAE's first contemporary art exhibitions.

Over the decades, he has witnessed development on an unprecedented scale. But, as he sees it, in the past 10 years, things have slowed down in Khor Fakkan. We

really need a push from the government to create more opportunities. There is no cinema, no theatre, nothing to do for young people except sitting on the Corniche or playing football.

As a young artist, and well into middle age, Mohamed worked hard to try to bring diversity to local cultural life. For years, he devoted himself to serving as a contemporary art educator and organizer of cultural events. Eventually, this led him to found the Khor Fakkan Art Centre in 1992, which still exists today. Although he has not been active there for several years, he still wishes that the center, which is located in a converted residential villa, was given better funding so it could establish a purpose-built facility and hire more instructors.

In *The Poetics of Space* (1968), Gaston Bachelard quotes George Simmel: What is more beautiful than a road? It is the symbol and the image of an active and varied life; and concludes: Each one of us, then, should speak of his roads, his crossroads, his roadside benches. In Khor Fakkan, Bachelard's theory has long become practice. Everything relates to roads in some way or another. There are always people standing or lounging on sofas by the side of the road, waiting for a ride. People's daily routes between highway interchanges, rest stops, mainroads and backstreets are the thin but far-reaching threads that bind the urban fabric here.

For a long time, Khor Fakkan was primarily a port town. In the absence of roads, ships were the most important

mode of transport. Due to the nature of Khor Fakkan's surrounding terrain and tribes, the village had more connections to the outside world than other settlements nearby.

In the 1970s, it could still take seven hours to travel from Khor Fakkan to Sharjah by car, going off-road first across the mountains and then through the desert. Today, this route takes under an hour. Dubai is two hours away, Abu Dhabi around three.

The new Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed road, which has linked Fujairah to Dubai since 2011, was described by Mohamed in this way: "Roads are like new nerve tracts; they create new sensibilities and they attract new life. When I was little, I remember thinking of the old Masafi route as 'the new road'. It gave rise to new settlements in the mountains, as people moved closer to the road because they wanted to connect. This new road is already having the same effect."

Beyond the city limits of Dubai, Sharjah and Abu Dhabi, beyond stretches of desert and mountain, the UAE's satellite towns occupy a fixed orbit, revolving around much larger centers, sending and receiving signals of various kinds: vehicles, people, relationships, products and, every now and then, even dreams.

"From the urban planner's perspective, satellite towns are remote dormitories for workers and consumers."



What does such a place look like? That depends entirely on who is looking.

To the outsider: highway interchanges; walled compounds; tasseled couches; vacant playgrounds; flagpoles; plastic chairs; excellent karak.

To the local: layers upon layers of memories; emotional echoes; hiding places; escape routes; uncoupled arrivals and departures.

From the urban planner's perspective, satellite towns are remote dormitories for workers and consumers, who would otherwise create the need to expand the parent city, upon which these towns still depend for jobs and services.

From the architect's point of view, satellite towns represent both problem and solution; a retro-futuristic concept weighed down by historic failures, yet tenaciously

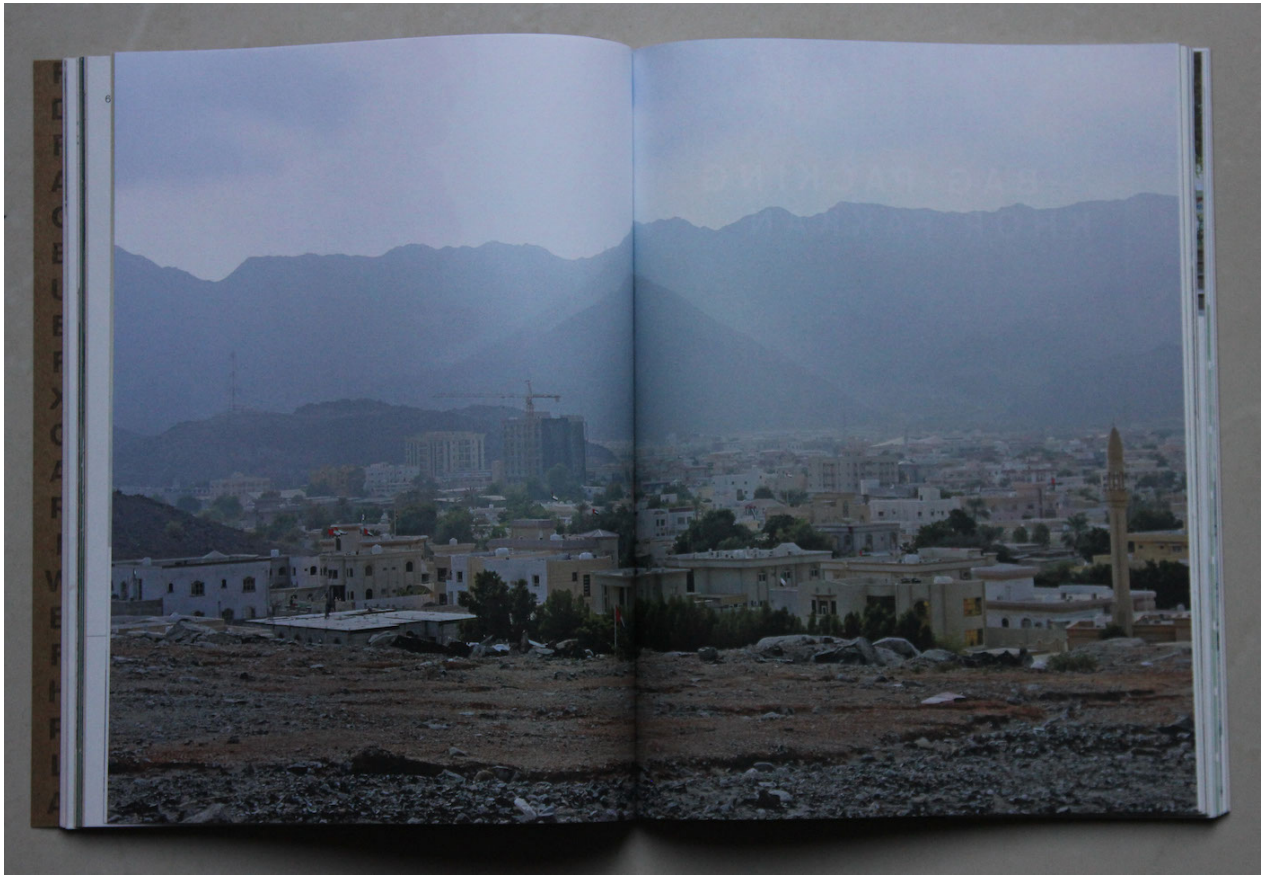
carried forward by a mixture of government policy and popular demand.

From the resident's point of view, however, they represent mostly one thing: home. And they do so for an ever-increasing amount of people in the UAE, because, despite improvements to vertical living, satellite towns continue to grow stealthily. City dwellers, dreaming of a simpler, less congested life, continue to move there. Locals, attached to their hometown in a myriad of ways, stay there, prepared to put up with long commutes and/or limited opportunities. Whether by natural growth or migration, more people each year home in on towns where life is conditional on an adjacent city.

The contrast between the way outsiders imagine satellite towns: a pinhead, paradise inhabited by a peculiar people; part high-brow, part bumpkin; and how residents see themselves as 'garden city' dwellers is as much as other men, though more fortunate in, because



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