

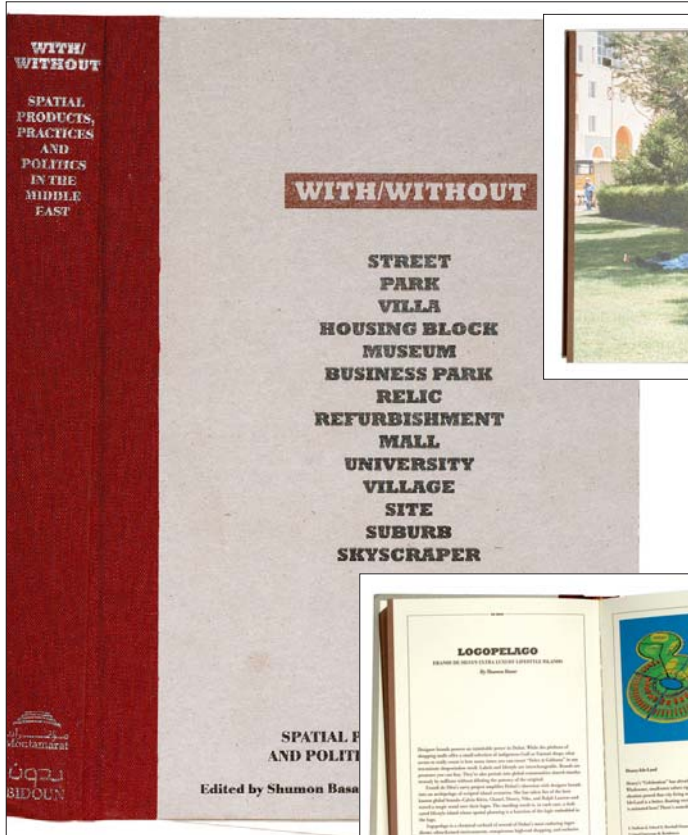
Books

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Construction sights

Dubai's cloud-spearing skyline and inimitable architecture are always the first things to captivate newcomers. But have you ever considered how the various malls and mansions reflect and even shape the society that lives within them? Spotting a line of contemporary thinking in need of some serious exploration, Bidoun, a Middle East-focused arts organisation, Moutamarat, a pan-Arab business initiative and 9714, a Dubai design agency came together to create the first ever book to address 'cultures of space in the Middle East'. *Becky Lucas* spoke to editors **Shumon Basar** and **Antonia Carver** to find out more about *With/Without*—the stylish and thought-provoking result

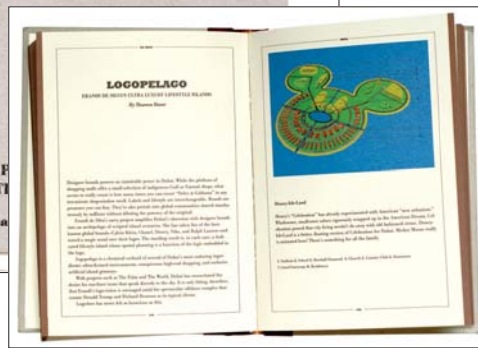
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Shumon, Markus [Miessen, the book's other editor] or I knew. Everyone was enthusiastic about the project, as there's very little published about spatial politics [the real-life consequences of building designs] in the region.

How did you pick the cities and spaces to focus on?

SB: The spaces (street, park, villa, suburb) are almost stereotypical bits of the European city that architectural and urbanism students learn about in their first years of studying. In the 21st century, these city-components have become the supposed DNA for any new city almost anywhere in the world, from the Middle East to the Far East.



But globalisation shouldn't mean homogenisation. The choice of cities like Beirut, Istanbul and Cairo testify to the inimitable differences that currently do and always will persist.

Do you think this book finds the Middle East one of the most exciting areas in the world when it comes to building design?

SB: If the 20th century was culturally and politically controlled by America and Western Europe, many critics and experts believe that the 21st century is heading 'East'. Nine out of 10 of the world's tallest buildings are in the East now. These architectural markers signify the drift, as do shifts in economic flow. Dubai has clearly set out to be the hub of hubs, and as such, has become an early case study in this new found frontier-world.

In one chapter, Mauricio Guillen labels the buildings of Dubai 'monobrutal' and 'a clash of hybrid styles', while Antonia, one of your essays suggests Arab-American universities leave a lot to be desired. Is the book controversial?

SB: There probably isn't a single place in the world that is beloved by everyone. Yet, more and more people are moving to cities. This doesn't mean that all cities are paradises: often the opposite is true. We felt it was important to express these kinds of accounts, even if they were disaffectionate or critical.

AC: Yes, I wouldn't say that those contributions were negative—the essay on American universities is critical in some ways, but also positive in its analysis. In Dubai, if a book or publication critiques at all, people often think it's negative, such is the volume of upbeat 'news'. But analysis and critique is wholly healthy and necessary for a city to grow.

The design of the book itself is very striking: thick matt paper, muted, understated colours. How does the design complement the copy?

AC: We wanted the design to reflect our anti-glossy outlook. We worked with 9714 designers Jana Allering and Raad Haider. It was a real challenge at times for all of us—editors, designers, printers, binders—to realise the book in the way we wanted. Halfway through we realised that no one publishes books like this here. We naturally gravitated towards images of works-in-progress—images that seemed to get under the skin of the city—rather than the usual self-congratulatory pictures of new, mega-developments.

Do you have plans for further books, on different kinds of spaces?

AC: We'll be publishing further series under the Bidoun Books imprint on Arab and Iranian art, and so on, and we hope to further the architectural series too. It partly depends on support. We're one of very few non-profit, independent publishers in the region. We've been delighted with the response to *With/Without*—distributors in Lebanon, Europe, the US and UK have taken it on, and we've had a fantastic response from the critics, so there's obviously a real thirst for books out there that take an informed, quizzical look at the region. ●

With/Without is published by Bidoun at Dhs90 and can be ordered from www.bidoun.com. For more information see moutamarat.com or 9714.com.

What are you hoping to achieve with the book?

Antonia Carver: Primarily, to generate debate. There's so much written about the Middle East, and Dubai in particular, but the discourse tends to veer between celebratory fluff and pompous, often ill-informed derision. We wanted to tackle the issues of architecture and design in a serious way, while leaving room for playful and personal reflections.

Do you think the Middle East's development, and Dubai's in particular, is being documented and analysed enough?

Shumon Basar: If there's one thing Dubai excels at, it's generating media interest. That's surely the logic of having a world record of world record-breaking phenomena, like the Burj Dubai or Dubai Mall. It's only in the last year or so that the academic world has taken note, and the next few months will

see a slew of publications take on Dubai's accelerated and unapologetic growth. One of the effects of the speed of change is that it renders all commentary redundant within weeks. It's a real challenge for the profession of criticism. **You have contributors from all over the world, from photographers in Milan and artists in Berlin, to architects in Stuttgart and magazine editors in New Delhi. How did you find them all?**

AC: The international nature of the contributors really reflects the current global interest in the Middle East and particularly Dubai. Some of the essays and photographic contributions in the book have appeared previously in *Bidoun* [their quarterly magazine]. Others were commissioned from writers, architects, designers, and photographers that