

# DISKUSSIONSPAPIERE

Steffen Wippel

The Reality and Hyperreality of Other Places

Integrated Tourism Complexes and Container Ports in Oman

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## List of Abbreviations

DFG	Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
ITC	Integrated Tourism Complex
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
SFZ	Salalah Free Zone
TEU	Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit (standard container)
ZMO	Zentrum Moderner Orient (Berlin)

## **Analysing Port and Tourism Development in a Conceptually Informed Perspective<sup>1</sup>**

To analyse the “hyperreality” of tourism and port sites in Oman and their “otherness” is a challenging endeavour when neighbouring Dubai is already so extremely hyperreal and its urbanistic and architectural design has been studied by so many scholars.<sup>2</sup> However, besides analysing how phenomena of a similar kind emerged in Oman, too, the intention of this article is to distinguish what is specific to the Sultanate compared with other places in the region and to consider such newly established projects from enlarged and multifaceted theoretical perspectives. Besides the economic and demographic centre of gravity along the country’s northern coast, examples will also be taken from the Salalah area in the southernmost region of Dhofar.

The article will start with the priority that the Omani authorities have given to tourism and port development in recent years in their ambition to prepare their country for the post-oil era. Then it will highlight the specific “other” character of tourist complexes and port installations in Oman. This will be related to conceptual points made mostly by some postmodern social scientists in recent decades: to the idea of hyperrealities developed by Eco and elaborated further by Baudrillard; to Foucault’s concept of *hétérotopies*; and to Augé’s idea of transitory *non-lieux*. Explanations will also include concepts of postmodern cities and their hyperrealistic characteristics as expounded by Soja. By stressing the fragmented order of such cities, he is close to Scholz, who investigated the multi-scalar fragmentation of the world under the conditions of the current globalisation. Finally, Firat and others explored the link between marketing, postmodernism and hyperreality. In this context, aspects of control, seclusion and simulation will also receive special attention. Yet, in the following, it is not the aim to consider port installations and tourism resorts as entirely “hyperreal”, “heterotopic” or “non-places” in advance, but to examine the degree to which characteristics described by various authors can be found in the Omani case.

### **Endeavours for Economic Diversification and Regional Development**

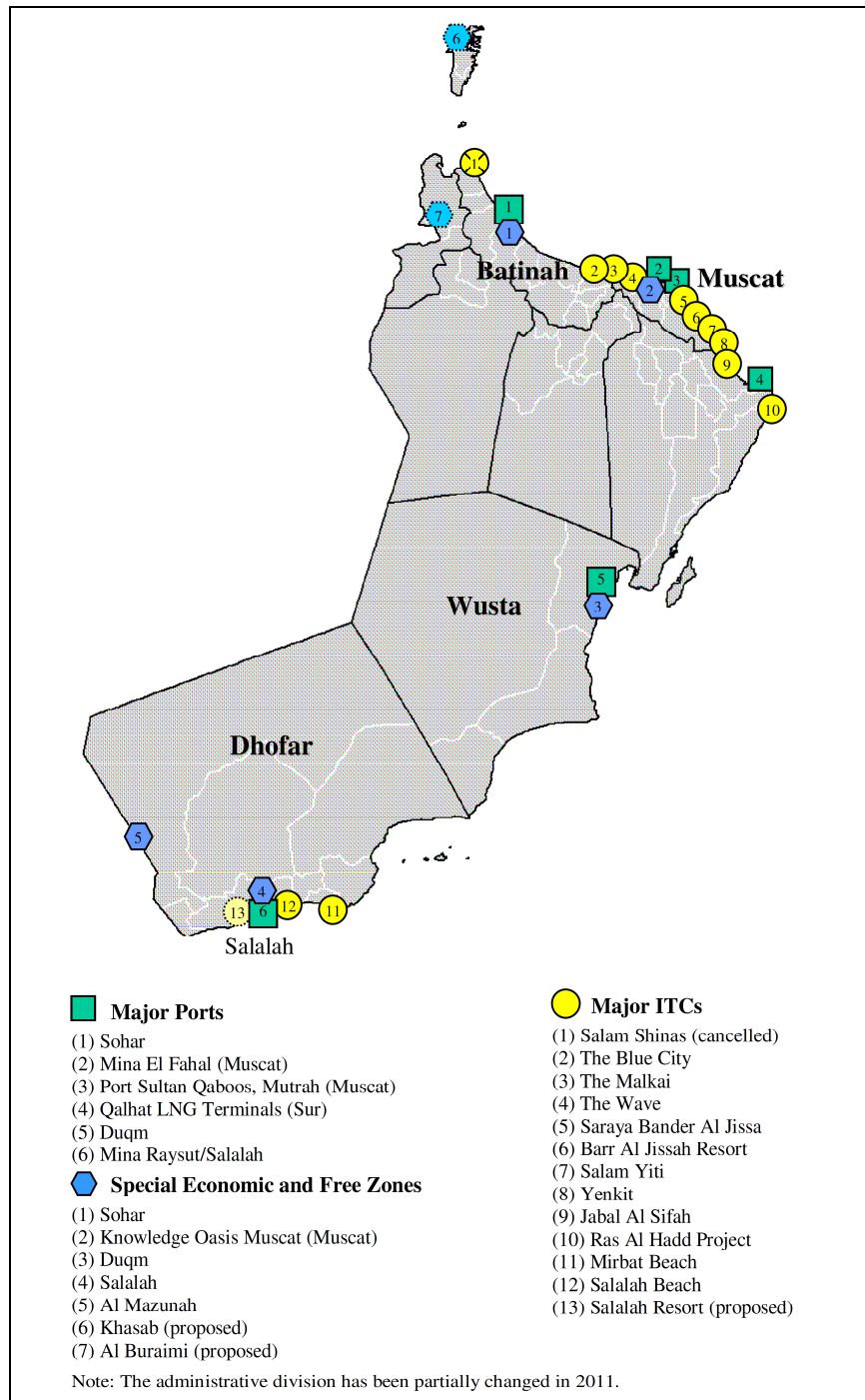
To reduce the country’s economy’s reliance on oil, the “Vision for Oman’s Economy - Oman 2020”, published in 1996, pursues the goal of economic diversification (Sultanate of Oman 2007). From less than two-thirds, the contribution of non-oil sectors to the overall GDP is to increase to over 90%. Among the segments mentioned, trade and tourism are expected to become leading sectors of the national economy.

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<sup>1</sup> The project “Tanger–Salalah: Globalising ‘Regional Cities’” at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin, on which this publication was based, was supported with funds from the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (funding code 01UG0713). The project “Between the Arab World and the Indian Ocean: Oman’s Regional Economic Orientations” at the University of Leipzig, financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG: GE 749/8-1 and 8-2), provided additional insight. In the following, empirical details are mostly based on information and documentation compiled during field research in Oman between 2009 and 2012; more details have been gathered from numerous newspaper articles, press releases, Internet sites and other unpublished documents. A first version of the paper was presented at the panel “(Hyper-)Realities on Stage in the Arab Gulf” at the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies in Barcelona, 20 July 2010. Initially, it was intended for publication elsewhere, but this publication was not realised. Hence, the paper reflects insights and data at the time of writing in 2013. It also contributed to an article (Wippel 2014) more focused on the branding issue.

<sup>2</sup> See in particular Schmid’s (2006; 2009) encompassing work on the city’s “economy of fascination” and Steiner’s (2010) seminal article on hyperreality and tourism in the Arab world.

**Figure 1: Oman Map**



Design: Steffen Wippel 2013.

Map basis: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dc/Oman\\_districts.png](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dc/Oman_districts.png) (27.02.2013).

Oman's aspired export orientation and the strategic valorisation of its location should contribute to making the country an international centre for trade. To this end, infrastructure relating to ports had to be upgraded. According to the Oman yearbook, "[p]articular importance is attached to making the Sultanate an east-west re-export hub" (Sultanate of Oman 2008, 185). In recent decades, most goods entered and left Oman via the port of Mutrah, but its location in the middle of the capital offers only limited expansion opportunities. From 1967 on, nearby Mina El Fahal served oil exports; in Qalhat, in the eastern part of the country, three LNG terminals have been open since the mid-1990s.

Under the current development strategy, three other large ports have been constructed and are expanding. Whereas the port of Salalah, opened in 1998, first of all works as a transshipment hub for containers near to the main East-West world trade route, the new port of Sohar, which started activities in 2004, mainly handles imports and exports and serves the industrial development of the Sultanate. Reaching a throughput of 3.7 million TEU in 2012, Salalah ranked around place 30 among container ports worldwide over most of the last decade; in the Western Indian Ocean it ranked fifth. Enlargement of its annual capacity from 4.5 to 7.5 million TEU is underway. Moreover, in 2012, the first stages of another cargo, container and oil port at Duqm and one of the biggest dry docks in the region for repairing big vessels have been inaugurated.

As for tourism, Oman only recently opened up to it, out of fear that it was infrastructurally and psychologically unprepared (Mershen 2007). But the Vision 2020 proposes also policies for encouraging tourism to more than triple its share in GDP by 2020. A constant improvement of tourism infrastructure and the promotion of so called “quality tourism” constitute principal elements of the national tourism strategy. The number of tourists staying in Oman, which should reach 5 million in 2020, climbed from merely 350,000 (1995) to its interim maximum of more than 1.8 million (2009). The number of hotels already quintupled and room capacity tripled over the same period. The 2006-10 Five-Year Plan started to multiply investment in major tourist projects by twenty to 2 billion riyals Omani (about 4 billion euro).

In line with a general trend in tourism development in the Arab world (Steiner 2010), most investment goes to “integrated tourism complexes” (ITCs): these include several international hotels, apartments and other tourist facilities, but also larger residential units and shopping areas and sometimes even encompass private hospitals and schools. The biggest project, Blue City, at an initially estimated cost of almost 20 billion US dollars, was intended to house up to 250,000 inhabitants in 2020. Further major projects, on which work has already started, include The Wave, Jabal Sifah and Salam Yiti along the coast near the capital, as well as the Salalah and Mirbat Beach resorts in the South. Yet in 2007, 43% of all hotels and 59% of the 3- to 5-star hotels were still concentrated in the capital area. Dhofar came second, where 15% of all hotels and 11% of the upper-class establishments were located.

The region has received special attention in recent years in the general endeavour to secure a geographically more balanced growth inside Oman. Already in the first half of the 1970s, to dampen the local civil war, almost a quarter of the national development budget was directed to Dhofar. Then, however, it seems that attention wavered and, apart from rapid social improvement, no considerable economic development took place. Only in the 1990s was an industrial zone set up near Salalah, and when the container port had taken root an adjacent free zone was established in 2006. Besides the two big ITCs already in progress, work on additional tourism schemes at the country’s south coast has started, too, or is in the pipeline. The big advantage of the Salalah area is the summer monsoon that offers it a second tourist season, when the heat becomes unbearable in the rest of the wider region.

## Hyperreality and Style Eclecticism

Steiner (2010) has already noted that numerous tourist complexes in the Arab world assemble various architectural styles to attract visitors with an “authentic” beauty and a “holistic” impression of traditional architecture. This is still in line with Eco’s (1995) understanding of hyperrealisation, when something “more real” than its archetype is constructed, or with Baudrillard’s (esp. 1976; 1981) first and second order types of simulacra, which are abstracting imitations and serial (re)productions of “reality” respectively, but still allow one to distinguish between original and copy (cp. figure 2).<sup>3</sup> Typical architectural examples are landscaped gardens, baroque theatres or several neo-traditional styles of representative buildings.

**Figure 2: First to Fourth Order Simulacra (Following Jean Baudrillard)**

Simulacra		Explanation / basic principles	Examples
First order	Representation Signs as symbols of the signified	(romanticising, feigning, abstracting) <b>imitation</b> of “reality” with reference to something “naturally given” → question of equivalence/analogy and antagonism/distance between original and imitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- free and competing imitation of nature and the human being between renaissance and French revolution (baroque theatres; British landscape gardens);</li> <li>- maps as representation of territorial possession and claims;</li> <li>- money as means for transaction;</li> <li>- automats as imitations of human operations</li> </ul>
Second order		(identical, serial) <b>(re)production</b> of “reality” with reference to something producible = corresponds to the logic of commodity exchange → questions distinctness of copy and original; starting disintegration of reality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- serial production in the age of industrial revolution;</li> <li>- machines as mechanically effective exaggeration of human beings;</li> <li>- money as means of investment (based on interest)</li> </ul>
Third order	Simulation Autonomisation of signs and creation of hyperrealities	(arbitrary, eclectic) combinations and permutations of signs preceding reality = collapse of the distinction between original and reproduction; no reference of the sign to something signified, yet with real consequences (adaptation of the real) → <b>simulation</b> replaces reality; self-referential system of signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- maps preceding and creating territories;</li> <li>- fashion as leitmotif for politics, economics, culture, morality, sexuality;</li> <li>- financial capital (speculative);</li> <li>- growth as an intrinsic value</li> <li>- labour as sign of social affiliation to worlds of labour, leisure and consumption (instead of means of production);</li> <li>- autonomisation of information landscapes/news worlds</li> </ul>
Fourth order		<b>complete absence</b> of points of reference/equivalences with reality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- autonomously floating speculative capital totally decoupled from real economy;</li> <li>- affluent (instead of growth) society;</li> <li>- self-perpetuating logic of circulation of production (independent of use of/supply with commodities);</li> <li>- “advertising for advertising”</li> <li>- advertisement-effective media suitability of political illusionary personalities</li> </ul>

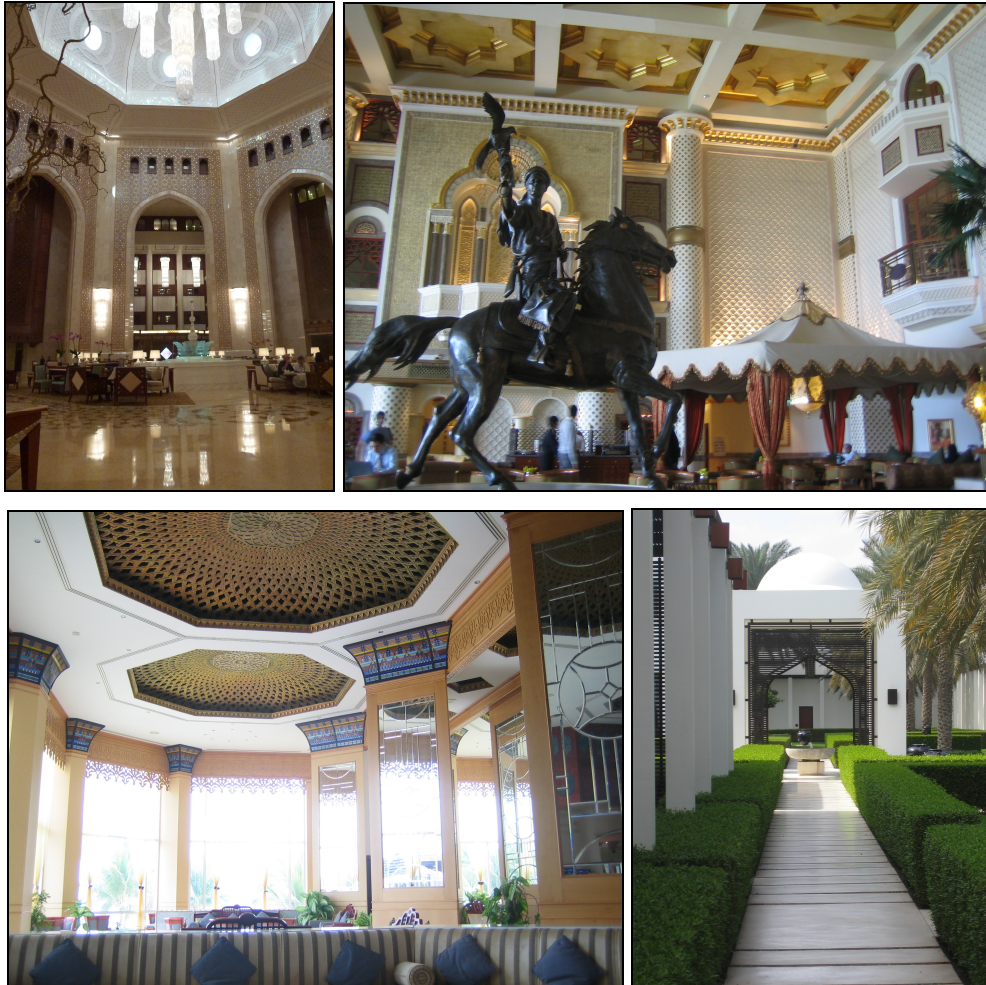
Sources: Horacek 2000; Blask 2005; Steiner 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard’s work is commonly considered hardly intelligible, so Blask (2005) and Horacek (2007), among others, strived for more concise elaborations. See also Steiner (2010).



In the Gulf area, such buildings and sites often display “Arab” and “Oriental” styles, which are in fact widely understood, artificial re-inventions, re-interpretations and re-creations of the “traditional”, but modernised, embellished and smoothed to cater to customers’ attitudes and expectations. Tourist guides confirm that Western visitors, for example, effectively take Dubai’s Madinat Jumeirah with its souq and alleyways for typical local flavour, at the same time enjoying its cleanness and security. But customers from the region like these artefacts, too, and thus it is also the Arabs themselves who contribute to “orientalise the Orient” (Steiner 2010, 246<sup>4</sup>).

*Figure 3: First Class Hotels in Oman*



From first row left to second row right: Al Bustan, Muscat; Grand Hyatt, Muscat; Crowne Plaza, Salalah; The Chedi, Muscat.

Photos: Steffen Wippel 2009-2012.

Especially in the earlier stages of tourism development in Oman, first class hotels, too, often showed features that might conform more to an Arab than a European taste (cf. figure 3). For example, the famous Al Bustan hotel near the capital, which was built in 1985 as one of the first luxury hotels, is renowned for its pretentious interior, reportedly culminating in golden

<sup>4</sup> Referring to A. Al-Hamarneh’s paper “Orientalizing the Orient – Postmodern Geographies of Tourism in the Arab World”, presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Congress of Middle Eastern Studies, Amman, 11-17 June 2006.

water taps, whereas the Grand Hyatt hotel that was built about a decade later displays an even more plush, colourful and over-decorated interior. In Salalah, the hall of the renovated Crown Plaza mixes Arabised with Old Egyptian elements. This starkly contrasts with the purist “Asian Oriental” style of the newer Chedi hotel at Muscat, where a seemingly Western clientele dominates.

*Figure 4: Advertisement for the Salalah Beach Villas*



Source: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Muriya-Tourism-Development/119211354764558> (07.12.2012).

In contrast, pure simulations – third- (and perhaps fourth-<sup>5</sup>) order simulacra, to speak in Baudrillard’s terms – increasingly lack any spatial, historical or social embeddedness, and architectural and interior designs are combined arbitrarily. Likewise, newer installations in Oman display more advanced style eclecticism. Exemplarily for recent ITCs, at the Salalah Beach and Jabal Sifah projects, whose first phases are now on sale, one type of villas is designed “with the spirit of conventional houses within the region” (figure 4). The company emphasises that these homes have “spacious living areas and open patios in the centre” and a “uniquely designed wooden ‘mashrabieh’... which... creates a beautiful temporary atmosphere along with the traditional spirit”. But in fact this type of house basically has a concrete structure, decorated only with pinnacles, and its floor plan shows covered verandas open to the outside rather than inward-oriented courtyards. The “Quad Villas” have, according to the same re-sale brochure, “a conscious focus on traditional Omani architecture and style, at the

<sup>5</sup> With fourth-order simulacra, introduced by Baudrillard in his later work but used inconsistently, all pretence of reality has vanished, whereas third-order simulacra still create their own reality.

same time providing the quality of space expected in today's modern living". A hybrid outlook is also characteristic of a third type that is "designed with a blend of traditional Arab architecture and modern abstract design". In contrast, a last kind of vacation homes is "inspired by the architectural style of the island of Djerba", displaying arches, vaults, domes and patios, and is sold as "stunning Mediterranean-style villas" (all quotes from Muriya Tourism Development and Orascom Development n.d.). Pictures illustrating interiors of all villas universally show furniture of modern international design.

Remarkably, most of the developers and architects are from the Gulf or other Arab origin. The Egyptian Orascom, the Omani government's partner in developing Salalah Beach, Jabal Sifah and other sites, had established El Gouna, one of the first ITCs in the Arab world (Steiner 2004), in the early 1990s and now is a worldwide constructor of such kind of schemes. Concurrently, the London-based international consultants who developed the second type of villas and had already designed the prestigious, style-mixing Sultan Qaboos Mosque in Muscat, insist on giving "particular attention to a contextual architectural philosophy" (Muriya Tourism Development n.d., 18).

### **Compensation and Integration as "Other" Places**

Ports and tourism schemes can also be regarded as non- and heterotopic places. According to Foucault (1984), heterotopic places are the "other" in society, counter-placements to the remaining world that they represent, reflect, challenge or suspend. Traditional heterotopias of crisis have nowadays been replaced by heterotopias of deviation that mainly serve to contain behaviour that is aberrant from the average or the norm. They oscillate between places of illusion that make real life appear even more restricted and limited and places of compensation that provide a perfect haven as a counterweight to the disordered and failed rest of society.

Heterotopias also open up for heterochronics, a brusque rupture with ordinary time. Holiday villages in particular, which started to boom around the 1960s, were regarded as archetypes. Thus, on the one hand, Omani ITCs are also opposed to normal life, stressing instead leisure, holidays and paradise as central dimensions. They give the illusion of temporary freedom to the weekender and tourist and compensate for daily life when they pledge to discover another more slow and relaxing pace or even another, exotic and distant world. They allow permanent residents to flee the bustle, dust and disorder of the nearby town and to live in a quiet, clean and green ambiance. On the other hand, they simulate being "townships", though with an artificially created and often temporary community of people and *ex ante* imposed regulations of social life and clean and cleansed of ordinary social problems and unwanted social encounters. Also, heterotopias as "actually realised utopias" (Foucault 1984, 47) can be found in the "paradise" or "garden" (Dhofar Tourism Company n.d.) that Salalah is vaunted to be, with reference to its fertile tropical orchards and its extraordinary greenness, especially during the extremely rainy *khareef* season (figure 5).



Figure 5: Garden City Salalah



Sources: [http://sphotos-a.xx.fbcdn.net/hphotos-frc3/p480x480/600049\\_333925706692010\\_1315361649\\_n.jpg](http://sphotos-a.xx.fbcdn.net/hphotos-frc3/p480x480/600049_333925706692010_1315361649_n.jpg) (01.05.2013); Salalah, Muriya Tourism (Advance Oman), under <http://www.facebook.com> (04.07.2012); Ministry of Tourism in Oman 2011.

*Non-lieux* are characterised by high mobility and dynamism (Augé 1992). The container port of Salalah, in particular, where commodities mostly only come in transit, rather than to affect the national market, is a good example. Since its inauguration, only 1 to 4% of the goods arriving at the port cross its landside limits, whereas the bulk of freight is directly transhipped to other container vessels: the container terminal thereby exhibits by far the highest transshipment rate worldwide. The space of the traveller is another prime example. In these monofunctional places, established for single purposes (such as specifically traffic, transit, trade or leisure), without history nor identity, instead of the *flâneur* (Augé 1992, 135) and holiday-maker who strolls around, explores the surroundings and returns again, we have the ephemeral and goal-oriented tourist and passenger. However, even such transit places have a local workforce and start to gather several functions, when encompassing “integrated” complexes are being established.

Thus, the motif of travel is a central experience of the “other”. For Foucault (1984, 49), it is symbolised at its best by ships, those places without a place, closed within themselves and heterotopias *par excellence*. In Oman, travel and trade and ships and the sea are closely linked and widely present. First, all ITCs are seaward-oriented, and marinas are always central features. The travelling tourist, if he is a non-Arab, increasingly arrives by ship, reflecting Oman’s interest in participating in the booming cruise business. As will be explained below, the maritime heritage of the Sultanate and especially its seafaring past is central to its national identity as well as for branding the country internationally. The ship and the sea are ubiquitous motifs; all over Oman we find references in signs, monuments and names (figure 6). Pictorial representations of shipping activities are to be found on the beloved clock towers, and a wide range of enterprises uses ships as symbols in their corporate design.

*Figure 6: Shipping Monuments in Oman*



From first row left to last row right: New Industrial Estate Roundabout, Salalah; Al Wizarat Roundabout (Muscat, Cultural Capital of the Arab World), Al Khuwair, Muscat; The “Sohar”, Al Bustan Roundabout, Muscat; Al Mina’ Roundabout, Mutrah; Clock Tower, Ruwi, Muscat; Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat.

Photos: Steffen Wippel 2009, 2010 and 2011.

Big ports (cf. figure 7) have a great symbolic importance, too. The ships calling may also constitute a symbol of a seemingly better, less hectic time when traders sailed with the monsoon winds, in a conspiratorial community of destiny, to faraway places where life could be more pleasant and enjoyable. In contrast, the huge container ships of today also stand for the “other” outside world, from which the overwhelming part of the population had been sealed off under the previous sultan, as well as for the country’s recovered economic and cultural openness. But while traditional ports where ships dropped anchor and goods were exchanged



often allowed for deviant behaviour and the presence of strange persons, today's container hubs are clean and work there is dehumanised, which makes them places set apart once again.

**Figure 7: Omani Ports of Mutrah and Salalah**



Photos: Steffen Wippel 2009.

In contrast to some euphoric views of alternative society projects, for Chlada (2006) it is very debatable whether qualitatively other places that can be separated from the rest of society can exist. He remarks that it is nearly impossible for these heterotopic places to step out of the contexts of existing society, namely its capitalistic market conditions. Rather, they do not question the system, but abet lifestyles in conformity with capitalism; they serve less to change society than to provide individual relief within it. Hence, ITCs in Oman, too, might pretend to compensate for the hardship of daily life. But as their use for branding shows, the commodification of their image and their use for purposes of capitalistic exploitation are essential. Money is always the central interest in establishing them, and everything has to be paid for dearly. Their first goal is to generate profits for their owners and developers and thereby also make the regional or national economy prosper in perpetuation of a capitalistic mode of development – which is also the principal hope that the government's support is based upon.

Similarly, Baudrillard (1976) associated third-order simulacra with financial speculative capital as a prototype. Intimate links between real estate and speculation were demonstrated when Dubai, where most new building had served speculative purposes, showed up as one of the most severely hit places in the MENA region during the 2008/09 financial crisis. In contrast, Oman, as a latecomer in real estate development, was still rather secure. Nevertheless several projects suffered, mostly the ones with stakes from Dubai: the Shinas complex at the Fujairah border was abandoned, and the Salam Yiti project south of Muscat at least temporarily cancelled. Other schemes have been adjourned and re-conceptualised, mainly the huge Blue City project. In the Dhofar region, there has also been some unintended delay in project execution. Holiday business in general is rather volatile, and high-end tourism and potential residents, in particular, are very sensitive to economic and political circumstances. Consequently Oman started to re-orientate its development schemes even more away from international speculation to local purchase.

## Marketing in Postmodern Times

Marketing, branding and media are considered central to the establishment and propagation of hyperrealities. With respect to third- and fourth-order simulacra, Baudrillard already emphasised the role of mass media and information technologies that generate their own new realities (Horacek 2007; Blask 2005, 24ff.). Soja (1993; 1995) notes that, in postmodern times, the world of simulacra penetrates daily life and captures entire settlement complexes that are more and more conceived in accordance with mottos and themes. As Firat et al. (1995, 42) state, “[C]onsumption and marketing tend... to be the most fertile ground for the hyperreal,” and “the postmodern age is regarded essentially as a marketing age” (ibid., 48). All the locally disembedded worlds apart from ordinary life and reality, which are characteristic of contemporary society, need to attract business and people and thereby strongly draw on merchandising to individualise them among competing places.

Being overwhelmingly ephemeral and transitory, “non-places” display a need for the creation of myths and some references, if only fictitious ones, to their surroundings. The anonymity of such places is often complemented by high recognisability – through iconic buildings, easily apprehensible shapes or brand affiliation. Finally, Steiner (2010, 246) already affirmed that the hyperreal character of many tourist places nowadays ideally fit marketing requirements. The symbolic helps to create comparative advantages, to shape consumers’ needs, to generate fascination and to attract the scarce commodity of attention, as demonstrated by Schmid (2006; 2009) for Las Vegas and Dubai.

**Figure 8: Ease, Pleasure and Romanticism**



Sources: <http://www.mirbatbeach.com/location.html> (15.07.2010);  
[http://www.salalahbeach.com/Uploads/Brochure/Salalah/Salalah\\_Villas\\_Fin.pdf](http://www.salalahbeach.com/Uploads/Brochure/Salalah/Salalah_Villas_Fin.pdf) (04.07.2010)

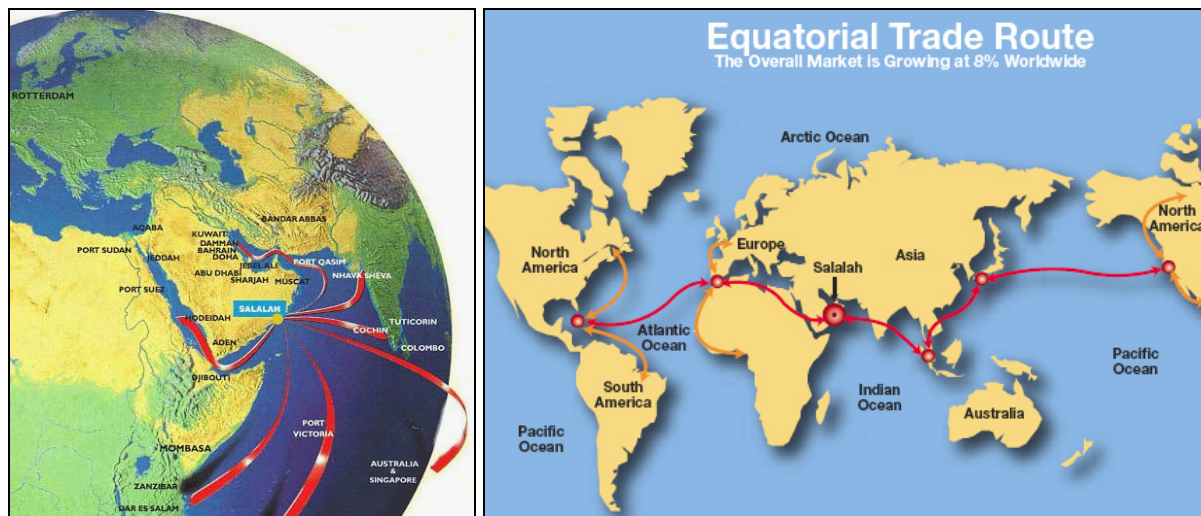
Accordingly, marketing and branding are central features of ITCs, but also of ports in Oman. Especially when we look at advertisements of ITCs, first of all, they strive to present an ambiance of beauty, ease and light-heartedness, of pleasure, happy families, blue sky and romantic sunset or moonshine (cf. figure 8). Scenic landscapes (mostly beaches, mountainous backgrounds and rocky shores) as well as scenes from traditional Oman are used extensively to advertise the new tourist complexes, and immaculate pictures represent the claim of luxury and high-end tourism. Even if in the end

the purpose is to vend the product, marketing starts with creating and selling an atmosphere and an image that ultimately will make this product.

Tourist sites and ports also contribute to the marketing of whole cities, or to the self-identification and branding of a nation. Often words and vision refer to history and exoticism. Thus, the new container port of Salalah contributes to Oman's identity as a "seafaring nation". With it, the Omani government seeks to re-establish the country's historic role as an *entrepôt* for trade with the wider region. The port advertises itself as a "Gateway to the Indian Ocean countries" (Salalah Port Services Co. n.d.), serving 1.6 billion consumers from Africa through the Gulf to Asia, and integrates maps showing its strategic position (figure 9); the same is true for the adjacent Salalah Free Zone (SFZ).

An iconic value is inherent in the big cranes and vessels regularly displayed, which symbolise Oman's integration in the world economy – especially as the country had remained secluded over decades. They also demonstrate its bustling economy and its openness to the outside world with respect to material economic flows, but also in heart and mind. This is likewise represented by the (post)modern architecture of the new tourist resorts and the internationally composed customers and workforce (irrespective of its harsh working conditions) in both sectors. Tourism marketing in general and the advertising of specific ITCs in particular include references to the travels of Sinbad, the legendary seafarer and the country's presumable son, and to Oman's position at an intercontinental crossroads, reflected in cultural, linguistic, architectonic and culinary diversity and blending.

**Figure 9: Marketing and Mapping Salalah's Geo-Economic Location**



Sources: <http://www.salalahport.com> (18.02.2004); [http://www.locations4business.com/image\\_resizer.axs?filename=/agencies/gallery/images/ShippingOman.jpg&height=596.jpg](http://www.locations4business.com/image_resizer.axs?filename=/agencies/gallery/images/ShippingOman.jpg&height=596.jpg) (25.07.2012).

Postmodern marketing has to deal to an escalating extent with inconsistent consumer behaviour as well as with a multitude of addressees (Firat et al. 1995). It has to consider multiple and often highly contradictory value systems, lifestyles and preferences, especially since expanding from the national into the global market. This is particularly true for tourism. Whereas Al-Hamarneh and Steiner (2004) demonstrated a shift after 9/11 towards intraregional "Islamic tourism" in the Arab world in general, this has not been so evident in Oman. Despite a two-year decrease in European arrivals (and the more severe effects of the recent crises), over the last decade the share of tourist arrivals and overnight stays especially from Europe, but also from Oman and non-Arab Asia, showed an increasing trend, while the percentage of guests from the GCC and other Arab countries conspicuously decreased (Ministry of Tourism



in Oman and Deloitte 2008). Whereas GCC and European guests increasingly preferred five-star hotels, other Arab and Asian tourists, in contrast, stayed mainly in lower-ranked establishments. ITCs also concentrate on Arabs as the main investors and owners. Thus, style eclecticism, as demonstrated above, plays an important role in the new resorts. The marketing and branding of ports address global markets, too, with their different regional and sectoral publics.

*Figure 10: ITC Master Plans and Models*



First row: Salalah Beach; second row: Mirbat Beach; third row: The Wave and Blue City (Al Madina A'Zarqa).

Sources: <http://www.salalahbeach.com/DevelopmentSitePlans.aspx> (07.12.2012); Photo Steffen Wippel 2012; <http://www.mirbatbeach.com/Development.html> (04.07.2010); [http://realestate.theemiratesnetwork.com/developments/oman/images/the\\_wave.jpg](http://realestate.theemiratesnetwork.com/developments/oman/images/the_wave.jpg); [http://www.menainfra.com/media/article-images/top-stories/INFRAMENA/issue-2/Tales\\_from\\_the\\_blue\\_city\\_LG.png](http://www.menainfra.com/media/article-images/top-stories/INFRAMENA/issue-2/Tales_from_the_blue_city_LG.png) (both 15.07.2010).

## Simulation Preceding Reality

Hyperreality also means to generate something real without originating in reality and the total loss of perceivable differences between copy and original. According to Baudrillard (1981, 10), in the age of third-order simulacra, the territory no longer precedes a map that tries to reproduce and represent a kind of reality; rather, the map now precedes and even generates the territory. Baudrillard stated that events have to adapt to the mediated reality (Blask 2005, 32; Horacek 2007, 151); likewise, in postmodern marketing, images precede the final products and products strive to fill the marketed image (Firat et al. 1995, 45-6). Baudrillard also assumed that virtual computer simulations replace material architecture (Blask 2005, 117), and Soja (1995, 127) underlined the power of simulations in shaping reality in postmodern cities. Thus, plans, models and advertising have a central role in the new urbanistic and infra-structural features.

*Figure 11: Signboards Advertising ITCs*



Promotion for the Salalah Commercial & Tourist Complex at the construction site;  
The Wave in Salalah City Centre and in Muscat CBD.

Photos: Steffen Wippel 2010.

This is particularly true for long-term, master-planned port and tourism development schemes, as already stated for Arab ITCs in general (Steiner 2010, 242). But not only master plans, 3-D models and virtual computer simulations, too, are major instruments to merchandise new projects (figure 10). Sales offices, roadside billboards (cf. figure 11), sales brochures, newspaper announcements and developers' websites widely advertise and communicate them to the public long before construction is finished or even ground-breaking ceremonies are performed. They temporally precede, but also publicly perform, mentally implant and



virtually create any “material reality” of such projects in the form of simulated buildings, urban fabric and even entire new cities. It becomes nearly impossible to distinguish anymore between computer-simulated images (cp. figure 12), images of simulations (such as, in our case, project models) and “true” images – a trend reinforced by new computer technologies. Looking at advertisements of the Salalah Beach or The Wave projects that show animated homes and streets, the observer has difficulty identifying them as real photos or virtual simulations.

**Figure 12: Simulated Marina Life and Interiors (Salalah Beach)**



Sources: <http://www.salalahbeach.com/Uploads/Brochure/E-brochure-mini/brochure.pdf> (25.01.2010);  
<http://www.salalahbeach.com/Uploads/Brochure/Salalah/E-brochure-Slalah-Apartments/brochure.pdf>  
 (04.07.2010)

As Baudrillard stated for politics, namely that power is replaced by the media aptitude and promotional fitness of politicians (Horacek 2007, 154), in tourism, too, buildings and sites first of all have to fit into advertising campaigns before displaying functionality. Virtual simulations, for instance, allow purchasers of houses to play with their interiors, designing their “dream” kitchen or living room before it is delivered and installed (for Japan, Fırat et al. 1995, 51). In these “simulated cities” (Soja 1995, 135), it is not the *flâneur* and coffeehouse visitor hanging lazily around, the bustling shops and restaurants or the coming and going of boats that make the special ambiance, as was the case in former small coastal towns. Ports, as a global trend, are now removed from central areas of existing cities where they were once integrated in social and economic life or newly created at the periphery of urban agglomerations. Instead, architects, planners and investors simulate urban life on their computers, always creating the same marinas and indistinguishable commercial zones<sup>6</sup> *ex nihilo*. Like schemes in other Gulf states, The Wave and Blue City in particular display easily recognisable shapes that are widely advertised in the media, but that in fact are only discernable from images or a (future) aerial perspective.

<sup>6</sup> This will soon include new “gentrified” urban waterfronts as are now also planned for Mutrah and Muscat.

## Control of Access and Behaviour

Heteropic places are places where the abnormal is controlled and disciplined, places that are often committed to desire and lust, beauty or resistance, and which are tolerated as long as they do not constitute a public nuisance or danger (Foucault 1984). This is especially true for segregated tourist resorts: Omani authorities were very anxious about the possible conflict between unadapted behaviour and values, on the one hand, and local socio-cultural traditions, on the other, and about contamination by Western influences. Thus, the new global model of ITCs arrived in time to comfort the fear of unwanted encounter: sequestering the tourists that are nevertheless dearly needed economically from daily Omani life appeared to be a rather practical matter. This also might explain the long reluctance to allow smaller hotels or tourist villages to be established and integrated into the local, especially rural fabric. For foreign tourists, this means being able to continue their accustomed lifestyle; for Omanis who desire for a Western way of life, these complexes also offer an escape. The ambivalence of such gated places thus lies in the fact that they exclude some people from access, while opening opportunities for others.<sup>7</sup>

*Figure 13: Fenced Zones and Walled Plots in Salalah*



Port of Salalah; Salalah Free Zone; ‘Al Jannat’ Homes, Salalah Beach.

Photos: Steffen Wippel 2009 and 2010.

The enclosure also implies strong control of access. Entering heterotopias means passing entrance rites and the need for permission (Foucault 1984, 49)<sup>8</sup>. The same is true for non-places, which, as socially non-integrating worlds of individuality and transit, have a great need for continuous regulation and control (Augé 1992, 127ff.). Unlike the gradual transition from public to private, which is typical for old towns of the Arab-Islamic world, ITCs are totally private in the sense of ownership, control and management, and developers can impose their

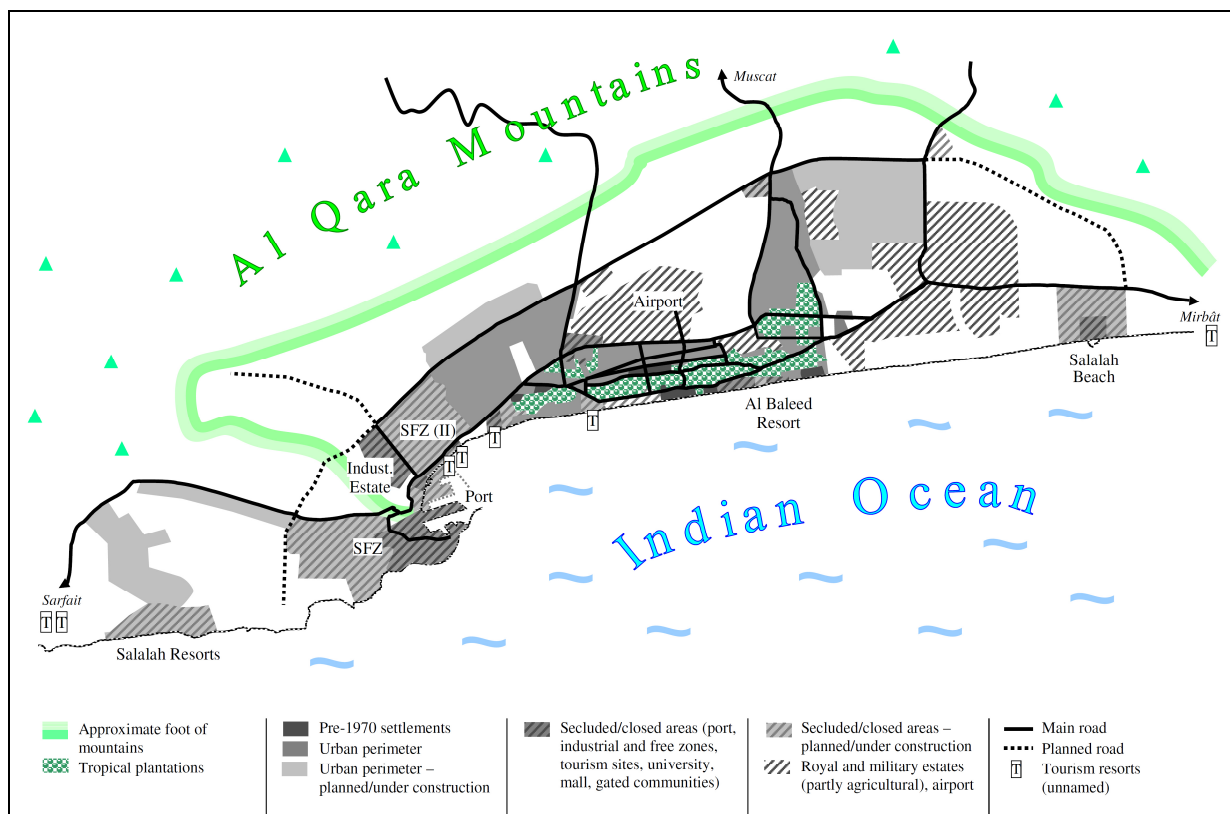
<sup>7</sup> Malls and gated communities – which expanded in Muscat over the last years, whereas in the Salalah the first of each did not open until 2012 – show similar characteristics.

<sup>8</sup> For the fortified city, cf. also Soja (1993, 224f.; 1995, 133ff.).

own rules and regulations. Entering these spaces means having to pass a number of gates or barriers (or at least a lengthy access road) or entering a contractual relationship with the investment or travel company (for solitary contractuality in non-places, see *ibid.* 119). Ports, especially modern container ports, including adjacent free zones, are even more highly securitized and have special regulations for entrance and sojourn (figure 13).

The need for control is especially perceived in alleged times when “global terror” attacks symbols of global capitalism and Western decadence and sensitive transit points for global flows. Thus, in a regional perspective, terrorists and pirates have been attacking ships in the north-western Indian Ocean and several tourist resorts in the Arab world and East Africa. While Oman was quite safe, piracy appeared in its territorial waters after 2009. But except for a few cruise tours that temporarily avoided calling at Omani ports or that bridged the region by air, there has been no considerable and lasting rerouting of goods and tourists or serious image damage.

**Figure 14: The Fragmentation of the Salalah Agglomeration**



Design: Steffen Wippel 2012.

### Fragmenting Urban Agglomeration

Besides describing hyperrealities as a part of the new geographies of postmodern cities, Soja (1993; 1995) also points to their decentralised, polycentric structure and, with that, their increasing geographical, economic and social fragmentation and heterogenisation. This results in mosaic-like patterns of unequally developed settlement areas, where parts of a city with very different social status, economic development or cultural background are contiguous. According to Scholz (2000; 2004, 221ff.), the fragmentation effects of the current globalisa-



tion crystallize on all spatial scales. On the urban scale, fragmentation is not only a concern of “acting global cities”, but also of places that can be considered to be “affected” by or “exposed” to globalisation; here free export production zones as well as leisure and tourism industries play an important role. Typically, such “globally integrated urban fragments” are well-connected translocally. Operational centres are surrounded by paradise- and citadel-like residential and representative quarters, followed by adjacent low-standard habitats and extended industrial zones.

The very purpose-oriented new ITCs and ports in Oman also can be regarded as contributing enormously to this spatial fragmentation, especially in the Sultanate’s two main urban agglomerations. As demonstrated for the port of Salalah, container hubs are, in general, highly integrated in the current global economy of flows, but only to a limited degree connected with their direct surroundings. The adjacent free zone also mainly runs on an import-export base, with few forward and backward links to the national economy. ITCs, too, draw on international customers and contribute little to an integrated urban fabric.

***Figure 15: The Road to Shangri-La***



Photo: Steffen Wippel 2009.

Divides in social status and the quality of real estate in Oman are not as blatant as in more peripheral countries of the world system or inside the cities at the global forefront. Nevertheless, the ITCs constitute “gated communities” for the local, regional and international tenants, designed according to global models. Their autonomous commercial and social infrastructure creates images of comprehensive “towns” of their own. In addition, they fundamentally reshape the landscape in a very literal sense, when the mountainous ground is modelled in accordance with the needs of spacious settlements and access roads (cf. figure 15); east of Salalah, that means that trunk roads have been relocated to allow for an undivided development area, but also that herders are blocked from access to traditional seasonal grazing grounds and that people have lost access to the most popular beaches.

### **Hyperrealities in Oman – The Anti-Dubai?**

As in the Arab world in general, in Oman, too, new resort complexes like The Wave and Salalah Beach create new postmodern “hyperrealities”, which largely lack spatial, historical and social embedding. It is not only pleasant, softened and smoothed promotion that places them in the category of the hyperreal, but also the underlying style eclecticism and simulations that

create their own realities. This intersects with aspects of locally non-embedded transitory *non-lieux* and compensatory counter-worlds and finally spatial fragmentation in postmodern cities.

However, postmodern theorists concede more or less explicitly that they present no exclusive, dichotomic attributes, but ideal categories that in fact still interpenetrate with older, pre-modern and modern, and material realities – or as Baudrillard stated: actually it is not reality that disappears, but rather forms of established and familiar reality (Blask 2005, 30). Thus, on the one hand, integrated tourist complexes and ports show many hyperreal features, but they are very real and material, too, especially the ports, where important commodities are handled. Both are in need of “concrete” infrastructure: besides buildings, mainly roads, airports and cranes to move people and goods. They are also firmly integrated in contemporary capitalistic society and the economic world system.

Yet, European elitist urban planners, architects and intellectuals often believe that only the original is valuable and attractive, and they disparage historicising “pleasure architecture”. Thus, an essay like Eco’s (1995) can be interpreted as a sign of Eurocentric arrogance vis-à-vis an American quest for authenticity. In contrast, Romeiß-Stracke (2007) asks that we consider such urbanistic schemes as a conscious designing of an otherwise faceless suburbia, and she points to (post)modern staging that is very real, as globally manifested in numerous iconic museum buildings. Already in the Baroque and Renaissance, new cities were created and simulated. At that time, they were intended to impress subjects, but today tourists love them, and they constitute socially integrated urban systems. However, it is a central question whether today’s “other” and “transitory” spaces will develop in a similar way and be socially appropriated in the future. This can already be observed in urban interstices in Dubai (El-sheshtawy 2010), but for Oman, which is less advanced in establishing this kind of architecture and urbanism, it is too early to judge.

This is also to say that it is difficult to analyse hyperrealities in Oman when it has the “undisputed epicentre of iconographic destination development” (Steiner 2009b, 4) as a neighbour, where themed buildings, parks and malls are ubiquitous and are widely mediatised and radiating. Today, competition among Arab Gulf states for tourism and port traffic is fierce. But here, as in many other fields, Oman’s position towards other Gulf emirates is more than ambivalent. On the one hand, it envies and admires the success Dubai has in attracting global attention. Being a small oil producer and feeling that the end of the oil-era will come soon, it similarly tries to adopt existing models and make tourism, transport and trade contribute considerably to continuous economic development.

On the other hand, Oman is looking for a specific way less hyperreal than that of other places in the region. It wants to distance itself from its potent northern neighbour, to avoid its extremes and pursue a more modest development path. Problems of vexing socio-cultural encounter are one of its most important concerns, particularly in regard to tourism. Therefore, it focuses on high-end tourism, mostly organised and preferably segregated as much as possible, with less iconic buildings, and plays on comparative advantages such as a relatively varied landscape and a set of historical monuments. In trade and transport, it mainly tries to build geostrategic advantages and a reputation as a stable, trustworthy country. Official Omani tourist information merchandises the Sultanate as the “legend at the Gulf” (<http://www.omantourism.de>, <http://www.omantourism.dk>, <http://www.omantourism.se>, all

25.09.2012), in contrast to the neighbouring restless, high-rising world city, and asks the public: “Why do as everybody?” (Sultanat d’Oman n.d.)

**Figure 16: Merchandising Oman as the “Anti-Dubai”**



Sources: Sultanat d’Oman n.d.; <http://www.omantourism.se/fileadmin/website/61download/Oman2011.pdf> (25.09.2012).

This is reflected in international media that call Oman the “Anti-Dubai” (e.g., Haas 2012; Otterman 2008; Kirsch 2007), which is “Away from the Gulf’s glamour” (Bagnall 2009). Nevertheless, tourism development needs reference to the Gulf, either positively or negatively, because compared with Mediterranean Arab countries or nearby India, for instance, the landscape and history on which Oman builds will be rather unspectacular. Oman heavily draws on the Emirates’ market, addressing the local as well as the expatriate communities and offering complementary tours for foreign tourists. With that, Oman simultaneously partakes in Dubai’s glamour and brightness and oscillates between imitation and originality.

Finally it should be emphasised that these phenomena are nothing absolutely specific to the Gulf area, but rather part of a worldwide evolution towards a postmodern society and urbanism featuring numerous hyperrealities, themed sites and segregated places. But news of disasters can immediately affect customers’ behaviour, with even long-distance spillover effects (Steiner 2009a). With the establishment and marketing of port and tourism installations, Oman is trying to move from the global(ised) periphery toward the centre of the world system, as Dubai has already done. But considering the volatility of flows and the competition for continued attention, these places are always in danger of falling back into the precarious, disconnected global “new South” (Scholz 2000, 13). The recent demonstrations in the “Arab Spring”, whose scale in Oman was modest compared with other Arab countries, reflected underlying unease with socio-economic cleavages, but also with prevalent corruption and planning procedures, like in Salalah, where demonstrators protested against expropriations carried out in favour of one of the huge tourism projects (Worrall 2012).



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