

The Ecotopia 2121 project

A Utopia for Abu Dhabi

“Cities grow great only when citizens plant trees whose shade they will not live to enjoy.”

Arab proverb

By Alan Marshall

In the Ecotopia 2121 project, I envision the future of 100 cities worldwide as though, by the year 2121, they have overcome all major social problems and grown to be super ecofriendly. The underlying methods vary. For example, I used a literary method of urban design to draw inspiration from Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) and imagine London in 2121 as a city exclusively for children and old people. In other cases, I projected historical patterns into the future, imagined the impact of new technology, or followed the trajectory of present social tensions. While I lived in the Emirati city of Abu Dhabi, its crass inequalities captured my imagination. The following is based on the case study in Marshall (2016). Find the accompanying illustration on the project website.

A desert utopia

In the present, Abu Dhabi is realising many huge infrastructure projects to amplify its economic development and global image. In the Ecotopia 2121 vision, a half-built skeleton of a tower, once to be a private villa for the city’s elite, has been redeveloped into the likeness of a palm tree. Emerging high from the city centre and equipped with flexible solar panels and windcatcher instruments for natural ventilation, its shade offers free communal relief from the desert sun. While, at present, the megastructures of the Emirates, including the Dubai Palm Islands and the Dubai Creek Tower, are private commercial projects, in 2121 the Abu Dhabi Palm is a public facility, a passive cooling device that reduces the need for energy-greedy air conditioning.

People in present-day Abu Dhabi depend on cars because they prefer to travel in air-conditioned luxury and have access to cheap local fuels. In Abu Dhabi 2121, the stranglehold of the car on city life is broken with the help of a socio-architectural design comprising low-rise dwellings interconnected with walkways. The dwellings, partly inspired by the domestic houses in the Thar Desert of India and Pakistan and made from local sand and mud mixed with palm leaves and dried camel dung,

are highly energy-efficient throughout their lifecycle. The walkways connect the community while providing shade for pedestrians and gardens below. Today’s noisy and dangerous inner suburbs have been converted into relaxed neighbourhoods where walking is so convenient that cars are hardly needed.

So, what is the “agent of change” that transforms Abu Dhabi into this desert utopia? It is not technology or economic development, but immigrant revolution. Abu Dhabi’s present infrastructure projects are realised using the cheap labour of South Asian guestworkers. The labourers often suffer atrocious working and living conditions. They endure long workdays, low wages, oppressive visa rules, and cramped quarters in substandard housing.

By 2121, the society of Abu Dhabi has fundamentally changed. Decades ago, the horrid treatment of guestworkers provoked mass revolts which spread across the city. Since immigrants made up some 80% of Abu Dhabi’s population, they had power in numbers. Having overthrown the government, they announced secession from the Emirates to set up an independent democratic nation. The new legislature and government granted citizenship to long-time guestworkers, re-wrote labour law, and used inspiration from the dry regions of South Asia to develop environmentally adapted village architectures and economies. And so, by and by, a desert utopia has bloomed.

Sparking our future imagination

I started Ecotopia 2121 to encourage conversations about radical alternatives in urban development and because nothing does this better than provocative visions. It may be working. Several case studies have featured in online media including *CNN*, *National Geographic* and *Al Jazeera*. London 2121 was exhibited at the Museum of London. Similarly, showcasing Abu Dhabi 2121 in one of the city’s fine art museums could inspire residents to reimagine their future.

References

Marshall, A. (2016): *Ecotopia 2121: Visions of our future green utopia*. New York, Skyhorse.

AUTHOR + CONTACT

Dr. Alan Marshall is a lecturer at Mahidol University, Thailand, and an author, scholar, and artist in the field of environmental studies.

Email: alan.mar@mahidol.ac.th,
Internet: <https://ecotopia2121.com>

