



MASDAR'S ZERO-CARBON MASTER PLAN

The tiny emirate of Abu Dhabi is thinking big. Steeped in tradition yet swimming in wealth and modern trappings, this desert kingdom is positioning itself to become the nexus of the post-oil economy. And with a resolute leadership, budgets in the billions and plenty of foreign manpower, it looks set to pull it off.

The plan's centrepiece is Masdar City, a new 6.5-square-kilometre district on the edge of the urban core. The development, planned by Foster + Partners, will be based on the traditional walled Middle Eastern medina. Car free, human scaled and utilizing such vernacular design methods as passive shading and cooling, Masdar aims to be the world's first carbon-neutral city.

While integrating lessons from the past, Masdar will serve as an experiment for the future. It will employ a slew of cutting-edge technologies to provide superior quality of life while minimizing its ecological footprint. Its flat rooftops will glisten with solar panels, and an underground network of electric pod cars will make everything accessible in a few minutes' ride. And its office buildings will house a new economic sector, built from scratch and based on renewable energy and other sustainable technologies. Research centres and academic institutes will complement the new clean-tech cluster; the first students are due to move in this fall.

The emirate's enormous wealth comes directly from the ground. That hasn't changed, and it probably won't any time soon. In fact, the Emiratis, with their SUVs and incessant air conditioners, have one of the most unsustainable lifestyles on the planet. Meanwhile, this state's leadership, perhaps more than any other, understands that while the oil economy belongs to the previous century, the smart money for the next century is on ultra-green design.

JESSE FOX

Left, above: Workers from South Asia hold up a solar panel from a field of photovoltaics that power the overall construction of Masdar City, a carbon-neutral enclave in Abu Dhabi. Left, below: Designed by Zagato, these pod cars, or electric taxis, will provide emission-free, private-yet-public transportation for city inhabitants. Above: The master plan for Masdar City was devised by British architecture firm Foster + Partners.