

Gulf Labor's Observations and Recommendations after Visiting Saadiyat Island and Related Sites (March 14-21, 2014).

Members of Gulf Labor visited the worker accommodations on Saadiyat Island on March 17, and the Louvre and the Guggenheim sites on March 20, 2014. The following document outlines this group's main observations, concerns and suggestions. These are also based on: a) visits to related off-island sites in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah; b) interviews with workers both in the UAE and in their home countries; c) discussions with informed local sources and; d) previous visits by members of Gulf Labor. Our recommendations for TDIC Abu Dhabi and the Guggenheim Foundation are made with the sincere intention of cooperating with these institutions, on their implementation.

Gulf Labor was invited by TDIC (Saadiyat Island's master planner and developer, see tdic.ae) to visit the sites and accommodations on Saadiyat Island. We acknowledge TDIC's willingness to engage with Gulf Labor and the issues of workers' welfare seriously and in an open way. Our discussions with TDIC were held in the spirit of honest, straightforward debate and exchange of views. The representatives we met were TDIC's Public Relations staff. Unfortunately, we did not meet or interact with anyone at TDIC whose principal role was investigating and monitoring labor conditions, or promoting workers' welfare.

Our visits to the sites were accompanied by TDIC representatives, and, in the case of the Saadiyat Accommodation Village (SAV), by employees of Brookfield Multiplex (BM), a private company in charge of those facilities. Visits to the SAV and construction sites lasted about four hours total, but were preceded by lengthy discussions held in the TDIC office in Abu Dhabi, which we feel were productive in setting up a framework for dialogue. The visits were documented on photo and video by both Gulf Labor and TDIC. Subsequently, we have mutually agreed to publish any or all of this documentation, except where (as requested by TDIC and members of Gulf Labor) it directly identifies workers or representatives.

For ease of reading, this document is divided into the following sections:

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Main Observations:



A view of the Saadiyat Accommodation Village from the approach road.

The official name for the labor accommodation site (SAV) on Saadiyat Island is “village,” not the more commonly used “camp.” Village life is often what is left behind in the great migrations for work all over the world, and this name seems to invoke a re-creation of community. Actually generating a sense of community and well-being for thousands of migrant workers is a challenging task, and any effort to do so is up against prevailing conditions in the UAE. In many respects the SAV is similar to other labor camps; it is temporary housing tied to a construction project, hosting temporary workers while they are employed on Saadiyat Island projects, where onsite supervisors are still addressed as “camp bosses,” and where a broader national-level context of indebted migrant labor remains in place.

The road leading to the SAV travels for a dusty two kilometers beyond a check-point, beyond which casual visitors or members of the public are not permitted. The Saadiyat construction site itself acts as a giant buffer between the SAV and public roads and services. The thousands of workers in the SAV are thus isolated, and it was our impression that this inaccessibility contained and produced other forms of seclusion that are psychological, economic, legal, and gendered in nature. The SAV is 99.99% male in its population. It is designed to last for 20-odd years, the build-out period for TDIC’s Saadiyat Island projects. It is not, and will not be, integrated socially with the city or the even the island areas it serves. For these reasons, we do not believe that the SAV should be considered an ideal for workers housing in the region, or elsewhere.

Nevertheless, there are concrete benefits that the SAV offers to workers on Saadiyat. Among these are proximity to worksites (avoiding 1-3 hour commutes that are common elsewhere), and generally modern and clean facilities conforming to minimum international standards. There are TV rooms, a

well-manicured cricket pitch, a gymnasium, a library, pool tables, and other amenities rarely seen in accommodation for migrant workers. Gulf Labor's main concern is that such components of progress and comfort be directly linked to workers' welfare and well-being. Our visits allowed us a small window to evaluate some of these concerns, and to talk to some workers about them. Our conversations in the SAV were limited in time and scope, but we list below some of the chief concerns that emerged from them:

Wages on Saadiyat Island remain very low. Workers we met, including those contracted to the Louvre Abu Dhabi, Saadiyat Villas, and other TDIC projects, were earning basic salaries in the range of 650 – 900 AED a month (177 – 245 USD a month). In Mussafah, an area of Abu Dhabi which hosts many labor camps, employees who had worked on NYU's Saadiyat campus cited figures as low as 572 AED a month. With overtime, this could add up to between 1000 – 1200 AED a month, for 10-12 hours of work, six days a week. Overall, wages inside the SAV were not better than those for comparable employment in construction elsewhere in the UAE. It was also reported to us that a much publicized 20% pay raise, announced by the large manpower firm Arabtec after strikes by its workers in May 2013 (including many in the SAV working on the Louvre) has not materialized. Low pay was the single largest complaint we encountered in talking to workers throughout our visits.

All the twenty or so workers we spoke to at the SAV had paid recruitment fees. No one had yet been reimbursed these fees as required by TDIC's current Employment Practices Policy (EPP). As a result, for example, a Bangladeshi worker who had been in the UAE for three years, and had been working on Saadiyat for two of those years, had still not paid off his original debt. Workers in the SAV and on off-island sites described the average time needed to pay off their recruitment debt as two years, which is also the term of the work visa. This combination of high initial debt and low wages, along with dependency on a sponsor for renewing the two-year visa, generates intense pressure on workers, especially in the first few years after leaving their home countries.

The complaints redressal system at the SAV was not perceived to be functioning very well. Workers claimed that when they call the hotline, there is no immediate feedback, and they do not see responsive action taking place swiftly. Widespread problems were reported with the quality of the SAV food, and with sewage leaking from the upper bathrooms onto those below. The latter was quite a serious matter, since a number of workers said they were unable to take clean baths. Facilities management said that the problem of leakage was being dealt with, but that similar problems arose from time to time due to corrosion, specifically from the type of construction of these temporary buildings. The food issue was something they described as "complex" and related to different tastes of the workers. Both TDIC and BM seemed sincere in trying to fix infrastructural problems on the SAV site, but the complaints process may need to be thought of differently, beyond merely reporting to the facilities managers.

There are no organized workers' groups to speak to, and any representative system of workers coordination is not permitted. While it seemed to us that efforts are being made to address housing standards and general well-being in the SAV, communication with the workers seemed to be quite poor. In the absence of any formal worker representatives or alternatively, workers councils, it will remain difficult to evaluate problems and to gauge properly if employee needs are being fulfilled.

On our visit to the Louvre site, an engineer described to us the painstaking detail (to the millimeter) involved in the execution of the building's complex structural plan, and assured us that lavish resources were allocated to meeting any and all technical challenges involved. Similarly, considerable money and resources are spent on select features of the SAV, for example on maintaining the cricket pitch in a green and trimmed condition. Indeed, **companies housing their workers in the SAV pay TDIC on average more per worker, than that worker is paid in wages.**

Little fiscal or human attention seems to have been devoted to direct benefits to employees, such as recruitment debt relief or raised compensation levels. Committing resources to workers' priorities should be on a par with realizing the complexity of the museums' architectural plans.

Recommendations:

What follows below are recommendations that were discussed or put forward by us in our meetings with TDIC. Others have been considered and discussed among ourselves since the visits. Gulf Labor is proposing to collaborate with all parties involved in finding solutions, and to contribute its own resources wherever possible, to achieve positive results.

1. In order to deal with the recruitment debt issue as a historical and ongoing problem, **we propose that workers relocating to Saadiyat to build the Guggenheim should be paid a one-time Relocation Fee.** This would cover workers who have been in the country for many years, as well as those newly incoming. It would be an upfront payment to compensate for the average amount of recruitment fee, visa and flight costs that are almost universally known to have been paid by workers, which as per our current information would be about 2000 USD. This would help relieve workers of the immediate burden of debt, a condition (sometimes described by informed commentators as bonded labor) which underpins their extreme vulnerability. Workers building the region's most luxurious and large-scale developments should be able to offer their labor without this extreme pressure of indebtedness.
2. We understand that the above recommendation is no panacea for the issue of recruitment fees in general. To ensure that such a move does not have a negative effect on future recruiting or fees in home countries, we have three immediate suggestions:
 - A) **Contractors responding to the Guggenheim and other museum tenders should describe their recruiting processes in detail** (as per their own EPP). Guggenheim contractors should set a precedent by which information on the recruitment chain (i.e. which recruiters they are employing and which sub-contractors the recruiters are using) should be shared with recommended groups in home countries to ensure that recruitment abuse is minimized.
 - B) **An authoritative survey should be undertaken** of the recruitment and relocation histories of all workers at SAV immediately, so that this process can be mapped and made graspable for the first time. This would reveal patterns and concentrations of abuse, as well as throw up opportunities for further mitigations, not least to help us consolidate on the Relocation Fee reimbursement/payment recommendation above. This research should be enhanced by the inclusion of a main contractor on Saadiyat, such as Arabtec, engaging in or enabling the same research.
 - C) In common with other major contractors in the UAE (Al Nabooda and ATA Escon to name two) **the EPP should include a requirement that main contractors establish their own recruitment agencies in the country of origin** for their incoming workforce. This is not a perfect solution but it does dramatically reduce the scale of potential exploitation and increase the transparency of the process.

Taken together, these are ways in which the transnational problem of recruitment fees can be addressed positively, in cooperation with organizations in home countries and international ones such as the ILO with a shared interest in preventing the abuse of workers. Gulf Labor has already been in touch with organizations that are willing and able to undertake further studies for developing appropriate approaches and remedies. A list of these groups and

organizations, in Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and other relevant countries will be made available to TDIC by May 15th.

3. **TDIC should encourage the formation of workers councils within the SAV.** Workers themselves are well equipped to assess their welfare needs and how they might be best addressed. These councils, operating without fear of recrimination, should be trusted to represent workers' concerns and grievances and to look out for their general welfare. The current grievance redressal system is too top-down, and it does not appear to have generated much trust within the SAV. Further, Gulf Labor would like to be in contact with a TDIC official that is directly responsible for workers welfare. In our view, neither Brookfield Multiplex nor TDIC's Public Relations team currently has this role. We have been informed that there are TDIC employees who are doing research on workers welfare and recruitment, and that studies have been conducted on how conditions can be improved. We would like to see these studies, and be in contact with the employees who conduct them.
4. Based on what we found — that not all workers engaged on TDIC projects are even living in the SAV— **Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC), TDIC's commissioned compliance monitor, should be encouraged to amend its auditing methodologies.** Interviews conducted only in the SAV and in contractors' offices (both heavily surveilled locations) will not garner the fullest or the most qualitatively useful information. Nor will this kind of data-gathering capture the testimony of workers housed on off-island labor camps.
5. In all our interviews, the topmost grievance expressed by workers concerned their depressed wages. Accordingly, **we recommend that TDIC establish a Saadiyat Island living wage.** A living wage is distinct from the minimum wage, which in most locations, is estimated at the threshold of mere subsistence. Hundreds of municipalities and other smaller institutions (universities, airports) have adopted living wages as the standard by which employees can maintain a safe, decent standard of living within the cost horizon of any given community. At this point in time, the methods for calculating living wages are quite mature, and have been developed by labor economists on a comparative international framework. Among other things, a living wage would give Saadiyat workers a basic independence and mobility over how and where they choose to live in the UAE.
6. **We encourage the participation of the International Labor Organization (ILO).** We recommend that the Guggenheim Foundation and TDIC work with the UAE Ministry of Labor to invite the ILO in a multi-stakeholder process with the goal of designing and implementing these and other recommendations.

Some of the structural challenges facing the well-being of migrant workers require long-term, and nation-scale, solutions. These include the need for collective bargaining rights, guarantees of freedom of movement, and reforms of the sponsorship relationship. Similarly, the challenge of integrating worker housing into the social and physical fabric of host cities needs to be addressed seriously. Nonetheless, we believe that the proposals above can mitigate some of the immediate problems we encountered on and off Saadiyat Island, and they are relatively easy to implement. TDIC has a unique opportunity to set a model example for employee relations in the region. By following such a path now, we can envisage how, in the fullness of time, Saadiyat Island might be judged not just for the virtuosity of its urban and building designs but also for the humane conditions afforded its workforce.

Detailed Findings

3.A Workers in the SAV

According to Brookfield Multiplex, there were, at the time of our visit about 6000 workers living in the SAV, building the Louvre and other Saadiyat projects and infrastructure. Among 6000 men there were only 2 women, working in services on site.

The very first group of workers we spoke to in the SAV was a group watching television in an otherwise mostly empty recreation facility. These men had been moved to the SAV from Mafraq the night before our visit, and had been told about the move at 3 pm on that day. After a mostly sleepless night setting up in new rooms at the SAV, these 125 workers had been taken in the morning to their usual Saadiyat Villas worksite, and had been sent home early in the afternoon. TDIC informed us that such movements were common at the SAV because different contractors bring in employees for short-term work. However, in this case at least, a group of over a hundred people who were moved that day appear to have been working on a TDIC project (The Saadiyat Villas) while living in Al Jaber company's accommodations in Mafraq Workers' City, about 50 kilometers away. This information was at odds with TDIC's steadfast claim that everyone working on TDIC projects on Saadiyat is housed in the SAV.

At an off-island labor camp, we met three employees of Robodh Construction, a sub-contractor working on the St. Regis Hotel, the Louvre, and NYUAD. These workers had spent 33 days, two months and six months in the SAV respectively. In two of their cases, they reported being "promoted" out of the SAV by being made supervisors, without an increase in pay, so they could be moved from the SAV into cheaper and more distant housing. They were housed first in Mussafah (45 minutes away) and then Al Ain (more than two hours away) while still working on Saadiyat Island.

A vast majority of the workers we spoke to in our brief visit to the SAV had been there for a few months, and not years. Thus it appears that the SAV is more a short-term venue for those who are working on part of a project--on the Louvre's foundations, for example--than long-term housing for a community of workers. In some cases, as with Al Jaber and Robodh's workers above, even this temporary stay in the SAV while working on a TDIC project does not seem to be guaranteed.

At the same time, the SAV operates at less than half its 20,000 capacity. According to TDIC there have never been more than 14,000 workers there at one time. This is not because there are only that many workers actively engaged on Saadiyat. It is because companies do not always heed TDIC's requirement ("obliged" is the term in the EPP) to house their workers there. Those companies not contracted by TDIC often prefer not to pay to avoid the higher accommodations rates at SAV, even though they are working on Saadiyat and are encouraged to use the facility for proximity to the work sites. More details on the possible reasons for this are in the wages section, below.

3.B Living conditions in the SAV

The first impression on approaching the SAV by road is of its isolation from the rest of the city and from public roads. The SAV is 2 km inland from a checkpoint that marks the edge of the construction site, rendering any casual/ unannounced approach impossible. According to TDIC and BM, there are hourly buses that go to and from the check-point, which is the only way for workers to travel to the main road and connect to the city bus services, outside of traveling to work.

There are two principal kinds of accommodation in the SAV. Laborers' accommodation is 6 people to a room, while foremen and supervisors are housed 2 to a room. The 6-people rooms can be

compared favorably in size to rooms in other camps we have seen. There are three twin bunk beds and lockers, but no other furniture. There is a prominent list of what is not allowed inside the room, including eating, cooking, washing and drying, drinking alcohol, and pornography.



A room we were shown in the SAV with 6 beds

All meals in the SAV are provided by the central kitchen, as there is no cooking allowed elsewhere. The kitchen, like the other central facilities such as the gym, computer room, television rooms, etc. is well-equipped. However, during our visit we heard many complaints from workers about food. Indeed, in SAV this was the first thing many workers wanted to talk about. These complaints ranged from objections to its taste to allegations that something in the food made workers drowsy, as a result of which they ate very little. There was no way for Gulf Labor to verify these claims or sample the food itself, but we brought them to the notice of TDIC and BM officials. They noted that the food was subject to a complex negotiation at the SAV, as would be expected of different nationalities and varied cultural diets, but that they are working to improve the food quality overall.

Across the SAV, Pakistani and Bangladeshi workers were “segregated.” In the wake of strikes by Arabtec workers in May 2013 (the most prominent and well-reported among the “many” strikes that TDIC acknowledges to have affected the facility) workers recounted that many Bangladeshi men were sent home and replaced by Pakistani workers. According to them, this was among the factors that resulted in clashes between the two national groups, which turned violent in August 2013. After these events, Pakistani and Bangladeshi workers were kept separate, in a policy that remains in place in the SAV today.

During our visit, a group of workers returned from the Louvre site to the SAV. They had been working from 7am to 6pm, with a one-hour lunch break. A standard work day is 10 hours, including 2 hours overtime. One day a week is off, usually Friday. These workers and others we met

in front of the buildings had specific complaints about leaking sewage water in several lower-level bathrooms. According to one worker, “The vast majority of us are Muslims. Because of the sewage from above we cannot have a clean bath even before prayers.” BM reported that some recurring problems were related to corrosion and construction flaws in these temporary buildings, and that they were currently fixing the leakage problems.

3.C Wages and Companies in the SAV

In our interactions inside the SAV, we recorded some of the base monthly salaries as reported by workers:

- ◁ Carpenter, working on Saadiyat Villas: 650 AED (177 USD)
- ◁ Louvre worker: 750 AED (205 USD)
- ◁ Louvre infrastructure worker: 800 AED (218 USD)
- ◁ Three-year veteran of SAV, worked on infrastructure projects: 850 AED (231 USD)

TDIC did not allow us to distribute questionnaires to workers, and we do not have more detailed data on wages in the SAV. But such statements, combined with those from more detailed off-island interviews with men who had worked recently on NYU Abu Dhabi, the St. Regis hotel and the Saadiyat Villas (the last two being TDIC projects), led us to conclude that base salaries are in a range from 550 AED to about 900 AED at the maximum, for general building trades such as steelworker, mason, etc. Combined with overtime, which on Saadiyat projects is highly controlled and seems to be mandatory (not voluntary), the net salary of the vast majority of workers is from 1100 -1200 AED a month (300 – 320 USD a month). Salaries are paid electronically, and these days, generally on time.

Only after clearing their debts, and deducting personal costs such as phone and hygiene costs, are workers able to send money back to their home countries. Sample remittances to Bangladesh were about 15,000 Taka, or to Pakistan a similar amount in Rupees, which is less than USD 200. In many home countries, skilled construction workers could earn a similar amount, or better, while employed in urban areas. But obviously there are still many who come to the UAE for the sliver of advantage in savings which they can eke out. Not having many expenses of their own, combined with the savings from living in a camp without family, becomes an additional advantage for some. Many migrant workers are paid far less than they were promised by recruitment agencies. Notwithstanding conditions elsewhere, this does not qualify as a living wage in Abu Dhabi, the richest and most expensive of the Emirates, where per capita GDP of citizens is estimated at more than USD 100,000 a year.

According to an EPP compliance officer we interviewed, companies housing their workers in the SAV have to pay TDIC 42 AED per day per ordinary worker, and 66 AED per day per foreman-level worker. These would be the respective tariffs for 6-in-a-room or 2-in-a-room accommodations. It is notable that this amount is more than the average wages paid to a worker. Thus TDIC is asking companies, such as Al Jaber, Al Futtaim Carrilion, Arabtec, and their many smaller labor suppliers who are active on Saadiyat Island, to pay more for these facilities than they pay the workers. Given the choice, contractors on non-TDIC projects, notably NYUAD, prefer to house workers elsewhere, and these other camps are located as far away as Dubai and Al Ain-- a minimum 2-hour one-way commute. This reality, that the flagship housing project at SAV is at best only half-full, needs serious thought from TDIC and the companies that are working on Saadiyat Island.

3.D Recruitment fees

Every worker we met in the SAV and at off-island sites had paid recruitment fees to come to the UAE. Bangladeshi workers on the NYUAD sites reported paying between 1 lakh 20 thousand, and

3 lakhs in fees (1545 USD to 3864 USD). In the SAV, a worker who had come from Rajasthan in India three months ago, paid 65,000 Indian rupees (1078 USD) to an agent, apart from his visa and travel costs. Pakistani workers in Mussafah reported paying between 80,000 and 200,000 each (820 USD to 2050 USD). There is no difference between workers currently in the SAV and other workers outside, in terms of recruitment fees. A TDIC official who did not wish to be named, observed: “If there is a worker who said they have not paid a recruitment fee, I would not believe him.”

Six Bangladeshi workers whom we met in the SAV while they were playing carrom all said that they had taken loans with family land as collateral 3-5 years ago in order to pay recruiters. One of them who had arrived in the UAE three years ago categorically said that he had not yet been able to pay his loan back yet and would lose his land. According to an off-island interview with two Nepalese workers who had worked on NYUAD, three or four out of 10 workers lose their land as they are unable to pay the debt back in time.

Recruitment debt is a pervasive and ongoing problem that is recognized by all parties in this situation. Yet it seems to be an integral component of the migrant worker system. Who would work for such low wages for two years, unless to pay off a debt that had entrapped the lands and livelihoods of their families?

3.E The Louvre and Guggenheim sites

On 20th March 2014, Gulf Labor members were taken to visit the Louvre construction site, and also the Guggenheim site. The visit demonstrated the scale of the engineering challenges that TDIC was encountering while constructing these buildings.

This visit also showed us that, despite the Guggenheim Foundation's persistent claim that “the museum is not being built at the moment,” a good deal of work has already gone into its foundation pilings and the massive surrounding infrastructure without which the building will not stand. Their statements also belie the fact that as tenders for the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi have been floated in October last year, workers are expected to be hired by the appointed contractors by summer this year. The conditions of work and housing on the museum sites are being determined right now.



Pilings and earthwork at the Guggenheim site, 20th March 2014

3.F Related sites and issues beyond the SAV, including NYUAD

Members of Gulf Labor also visited other work and housing sites around Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah. We were able to record a number of interviews with workers. Some of these workers had been engaged on TDIC's Saadiyat projects but had not always lived in the SAV. Clearly, TDIC is not getting fully accurate information on where workers are being housed. Since PwC (TDIC's compliance monitor) only interviews workers in the SAV and at their employer's Saadiyat offices, its audits are not capturing the full scope of the workforce, or the potential EPP violations that occur in off-island sites.

In this section we focus on NYUAD workers, because many of our off-island interviewees had been engaged in building the university's new Saadiyat campus. NYUAD is not a TDIC project, and so its workers are not required to be housed in the SAV. Its Statement of Labor Values was established prior to TDIC's EPP, and in some respects, is stronger. Accordingly, there are good reasons to expect that many of the concerns we documented from these interviews of those who worked on the Saadiyat campus could also apply to workers on the TDIC projects.

NYUAD is being delivered under the auspices of Tamkeen, on behalf of Abu Dhabi's Executive Affairs Authority. Mubadala, an investment vehicle of the government, is the developer responsible for design implementation and construction. Our understanding is that workers are all supposed to be housed in Operatives Villages 1, 2 and 4 located on Yas Island or in the ICAD Residential City located in Mussafah, Abu Dhabi. However, we found workers housed in substandard facilities elsewhere, as have other independent investigators from Human Rights Watch and the foreign press.

In contrast to the compliance reports that PwC has delivered to TDIC, the reports of NYUAD's labor monitors, overseen by Mott MacDonald, have recorded very few violations of NYUAD's labor standards. Among the conflicts of interest associated with Mott MacDonald's appointment as monitor, it is worth noting the \$27 billion contract awarded to the firm by the Abu Dhabi Water and Electricity Authority to oversee the development of water and electricity systems on Saadiyat Island. Mott MacDonald mentions visits to the Yas Island and ICAD facilities in its reports, and we assume that the auditors have not ventured beyond these camps. In the course of our spot visits to a camp in Al Quoz in Dubai and to the BK Gulf camp in Mussafah, we found and spoke to workers who had been, or were still, engaged on the NYUAD project. In the course of our interviews with these workers and with other local sources we recorded the following violations of NYUAD's Labor Standards.

- 1) No worker was in possession of his passport.
- 2) Some workers did not have a written contract regarding hours and wages.
- 3) Overtime (amounting to 11- or 12-hour work days, and sometimes longer) was described as mandatory, not voluntary.
- 4) Sub-contractors (such as Robodh and Al Reyami) had failed to pay wages in a timely fashion, and were in arrears by several months.
- 5) Employers had not paid recruitment fees.
- 6) Some workers were housed in substandard camps, and some had endured long work commutes (up to three hours).
- 7) Many of the employees engaged in work stoppages (a four-hour strike by Al Reyami workers in June, and a larger two-day strike in August by BK Gulf workers housed in Yas Island and Jebel Ali) were terminated and deported without any due process. These summary actions appear to be in violation of NYUAD's Statement of Labor Values that "no worker shall be subject to harassment, intimidation or retaliation in their efforts to resolve work disputes."

- 8) While food allowances had been slightly increased in response to the August strike, subcontractors' additional promises of salary increases had not been kept.

3.G Overview of camp conditions in the UAE

We found a consistency in conditions across workers that we met; low-pay, heavy recruitment fee debts, long working and commuting hours, abuses relating to relocation and vacation costs including air tickets which companies are supposed to pay but workers do, lateness of pay, complaints about costs and quality of food when included in salaries/ benefits, isolation and exclusion from society and lack of access to public spaces, difficulties in pursuing legitimate grievances (including length of process, requirement for physical presence and payment for translations into Arabic), and a culture of buck-passing amongst contracting employers. Such conditions were encountered in all the labor camps we visited in Sharjah, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, hosting men from Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bangladesh who had either arrived in recent weeks or had been working there for up to ten or fifteen years.

Al Sajaa (Sharjah) was the most isolated industrial area and labor camps district we visited. It is surrounded by an impressive, newly-built infrastructure of roads and utilities for serving the nearby airport and to connect to Fujairah on the eastern coast, but otherwise has a derelict and abandoned feeling, located as it is some thirty kilometers from the city. The dozens of camps here border the desert and most interior roads are unpaved. Despite the geographic isolation, men can socialize publicly in cafeterias and small shops, can cook and sell food, and walk to public transport in ways that are impossible in the high-security containment of the SAV.



People walk back to their camps in Al Sajaa on Friday, a holiday

Al Quoz (Dubai) and Mussafah (Abu Dhabi) are both large industrial areas with labor camps interspersing anonymous industrial blocks. There are supermarkets and cafeterias/restaurants nearby where we were able to meet with workers. The edges of large arterial roads dividing the camps appeared to be the only public spaces available for workers to congregate (other than mosques) and socialize; i.e. to be part of a society broader than their own camp. “Workers City” is the preferred nomenclature in Mussafah, and these new urban-scale housing projects are nevertheless far from and have very little to do with “the city” of Abu Dhabi.



A panoramic view of ICAD, a new workers “city” in Mussafah, Abu Dhabi

Though we were not able to gain access to the interiors of the accommodations at Mafraq Workers City nos. 1 and 2 (Abu Dhabi), we were able to take a guided walk through this “city” itself, which is to say within its secured perimeters. Immediately outside the guarded gates was a large supermarket and gym. Inside the camp was a large mosque, and more evidence of efforts to create a quasi-urban feel: wide streets, dotted with occasional retail outlets, some spaces for gatherings amidst the gridded layout with its pavements and street lighting. While the potential capacity of Mafraq Workers City and the SAV is, in both cases, more than 20,000 men, the former uses far less temporary building materials and occupies a larger area on the ground.

Jebel Ali Industrial Area 1 (Dubai) contains about fifty labor camps of varying sizes and an aggregate population larger than the SAV or Mafraq. Here again the camps occupy a section of Jebel Ali’s industrial quarters and are isolated from any other urban connection. However, within the camp area there are several supermarkets, masjids, and some cafes/restaurants in addition to recreational space outside the loosely contained camp areas, though not much more. Though it is a dusty, grimy place, its inhabitants are free to come and go beyond their immediate camp-blocks and can be seen gathering in groups or sitting alone at dusk throughout the camps. Overall this felt like a more benign, sociable environment in spite of its neglected appearance, and the freedom of movement was in contrast with the excessive focus on “security” in some of the more heavily fenced-in and remote locations, like the SAV or Jebel Ali’s larger labor camps. Particularly evident in such places was the existence of street life and in the sociable “owned” spaces of cafes and restaurants as well as in the informal, or “hidden,” corners of the smaller camps. The advantages of the latter must be weighed against the cleaner accommodation and green lawns at SAV.

We visited a newly-built labor camp in Jebel Ali where a construction company along with some architects is making attempts to improve conditions in its new workers housing building; with larger rooms, higher ceilings, and natural as well as machine ventilation in rooms arranged around central ventilation shafts. These kinds of improvements need to be combined with the efforts to create “people-friendly” environments, allowing for more light and air, and the preservation of informal social spaces and access to the public realm.

One way to work towards that goal at Saadiyat itself is to include, in the long term, more permanent schemes of workers housing, not centralized but rather scattered throughout the 27 square kilometer area. This could be a bridge towards a more healthy and just society to come, in which construction and maintenance workers might live amongst communities of more permanent residents, either in state-provided social housing or in rented or other accommodation of their choosing.



A view of the compound in a camp in Mussafah where NYUAD workers live

Overall, what is crucially necessary to address is the removal from view and understanding, of those men who are building the UAE, from its citizenry and its visitors. Currently segregated in invisible and unacknowledged circumstances, workers are imperceptible to those populations whose infrastructural needs they are serving. If we withhold from suggesting that Emirati homes, tower blocks and museums should be built in the midst of workers' cities (although that may be the one way to achieve a properly mixed, healthy society), we must insist that migrant workers be recognized as full participants of the broader society they live and work in.