INTRODUCTION

In Saudi Arabia, rapid economic growth has been accompanied, in many areas, by the development of informal settlements and illegal squatting. With the affluent increasingly moving into newly constructed homes, housing in the older traditional quarters was often rented to foreigners. In many cases, dozens of migrant workers would share small apartments with ineffective sanitary systems. These areas quickly degraded into slums, lacking any social infrastructure like green spaces or cultural and educational facilities. These informal settlements are sobering evidence of a mismatch between the economic means of a segment of the population and the availability of affordable housing. The reality: cities produce many kinds of jobs, not all of which are high-paying. As a city becomes increasingly successful, the cost of real estate continues to rise, compounding the problem. Today, roughly two-thirds of Saudi Arabia’s population is under 30 years of age, and the country is attracting a high proportion of foreigners, including migrant workers as well as highly skilled experts. Given these trends, the Kingdom is realizing a strong need for diversification of the economy to cater to the growing workforce. This entails not only the provision of adequate jobs, but adequate housing.

1.1 KEY INTERVENTIONS

King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) will become a fully independent city for 1.75 million residents, with the majority living in affordable and mid-income housing. Basing the design on the King’s vision, the master developer Emaar aims to establish KAEC as an enabler of sustainable socio-economic development in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. A major part of this mission is to provide housing for all social classes and demographics, along with the social infrastructure to meet the specific needs of the population. Informal settlements, with their inadequate services, are to be avoided at all cost.

Forty percent of the first 5,000 units of housing under construction will be designated specifically for affordable housing. KAEC, with its beautiful setting on the Red Sea, will also provide ample public areas which can be enjoyed by all nationalities and demographics. In this respect, it contrasts with neighbouring Jeddah and other coastal settlements, which have historically emphasized private development along their shoreline.

1.2 GOVERNANCE

King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) will become a truly independent city for 1.75 million residents, with the majority living in affordable and mid-income housing. Basing the design on the King’s vision, the master developer Emaar aims to establish KAEC as an enabler of sustainable socio-economic development in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. A major part of this mission is to provide housing for all social classes and demographics, along with the social infrastructure to meet the specific needs of the population. Informal settlements, with their inadequate services, are to be avoided at all cost.

The largest permanent demographic group will remain Saudi Nationals, who maintain a distinct cultural and social heritage. The challenge is to bridge traditionally internal tribal customs, with their high emphasis on family privacy, with a modern twenty-first century open urban fabric.

The ultimate measure of success will be how attractive the city is to external investors, industrial tenants, and, not least of all, its citizens. Early observations of completed areas and the initial population indicate a high level of acceptance of KAEC as a unique, more open environment. This suggests that the city has tremendous potential as a platform for economic diversification, for integration of a vastly diverse population, and for social innovation (at an acceptable rate) in a country that has seen much change over the last decades.

CONCLUSION

The ultimate measure of success will be how attractive the city is to external investors, industrial tenants, and, not least of all, its citizens. Early observations of completed areas and the initial population indicate a high level of acceptance of KAEC as a unique, more open environment. This suggests that the city has tremendous potential as a platform for economic diversification, for integration of a vastly diverse population, and for social innovation (at an acceptable rate) in a country that has seen much change over the last decades.
In collaboration with MIT

KING ABDULLAH ECONOMIC CITY

COORDINATES
22°24’N 39°05’E

TOTAL AREA
67 sq mi
LAND AREA
65 sq mi
WATER AREA
2 sq mi

HOUSING AND SOCIAL CHANGE
Designing a new city with inclusiveness in mind

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SOURCES
1 Meshal Obeidallah, wikipedia.org
2-3 Skidmore Owings and Merrill, Chicago

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