



# CITIES & DESIRES

*Navigating the realms of irony and surrealism,  
Belgian photographer Nick Hannes's images  
portray extravagant cities  
and the human desires that shape them –  
they have a message about humanity:  
We were here and we built these cities.*

NICK HANNES

Could it be true that we are getting better acquainted with humanity, as our power augments? Could we discover humanity based on what humans can and choose to do? Could we assume that our true identity becomes more visible as we enjoy the liberty of doing as we please? Maybe... Or perhaps, the more infatuated we become with our achievements, the more likely we are to act before thinking, always looking back, trying to understand what we are doing. Belgian photographer Nick Hannes's images leave the viewer with the moment itself by briefly isolating the events he witnesses from their context. They are like guides for intrigued minds to stop and think.

Hannes developed his distinctive visual narrative, laced with absurdity and irony, during his trip through the former Soviet Union, in 2007-2008. After giving up his profession of photo-journalism, he embarked on this personal adventure during which he witnessed the shaping of identities, the contrasts and abandoned expectations to be found in these young nations, which emerged after the collapse of the USSR. In his first book, *Red Journey*, Hannes documents images of 15 different cultures - from Kyrgyzstan to the Ukraine and Estonia.

In 2010, he started *Mediterranean. The Continuity of Man*, an epic project that lasted four years and a series in which Hannes developed his ironic style and focused on more complicated subjects. According to British historian Ernle Bradford, the Mediterranean "celebrates the continuity of man" and Hannes made a mission of travelling extensively throughout all 21 countries which border it. He navigated these waters - home to some of the most stunning beaches on the planet, but also playing host to some of its most tragic disasters. He documented these modern crises, exploring migration, conflict and the impact of mass tourism, as well as life between the two extremes, realities and paradoxes in this ancient sea, which is the centre of civilisation.

Witnessing rapid and excessive urbanisation along its coastline, Hannes developed an interest in the relationship between this phenomenon, society and the environment. He also noticed something that was evolving in parallel to urbanisation - a culture of entertainment, consumption and luxury, perpetually trying to exceed itself. Throughout 2016-2017, this fascination led him to focus on Dubai as the place that epitomises this trend. Artificial, extravagant, unjust and unnecessary - it is easy to apply these labels to sprawling metropolises like Dubai. However, one needs to leave these disputes to other photo-stories and articles and focus on what Hannes's work underlines: These 'extravagant' cities are, in fact, mirrors which reflect the true face of humanity.

In his series, *Garden of Delight*, with a touch of absurdity, Hannes plainly portrays the lengths to which homo sapiens will go in the name of building cities - it is, after all, the species that founded a city in the middle of the desert, with an artificial ski slope at its centre. In this series, Hannes's greatest weapon is his almost magical ability to strip the moment from its context, simply by pressing the shutter button. But it would be unjust to think that the artist did this with a specific standard of judgement. Found worthy of the 2017 Magnum Photography Award and the 2018 Zeiss Photography Award, *Garden of Delight* does not merely reduce Dubai to being a new city that thrives on extravagance. Instead, it is an invitation to try and understand these never-ending cities which have evolved to become architecturally and emotionally intense. As Harvard economist Edward Glaeser puts it, cities are 'humanity's greatest invention'. They are more than just buildings, roads and green space. Arguably, the largest building block of a city is the people themselves. As for Dubai, it is a city shaped by human desires, much like other global cities, which have rapidly urbanised with the helping hand of globalisation and capitalism, and those gigantic tourist resorts that the artist photographed around the Mediterranean.

Hannes's photography series travel the world from the FoMu Museum of Photography to Perpignan's Visa pour l'image festival, giving the message: We were here and we built these cities. It goes without saying that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This principle must be behind the impossibility of containing our cities. In his novel *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino writes, 'The city of Anastasia comes across as a whole of which you are a part of, a place where every desire must be fulfilled. In fact, it enjoys everything you fail to, leaving you no choice but to live within this desire and make do.' Of course, it is likely that the rotting of our former desires might have no function other than to provide shade for sun-struck camels. ●



Ayni, Tajikistan, from *Red Journey*.





*On the previous page: Gaming and entertainment complex Hub Zero, City Walk, Dubai, January 5, 2017, from Garden of Delight.*

*On the left: Oasis Mall, January 6, 2016.*

*Above: Sales office of Dubailand, a 278 km<sup>2</sup> theme park development, with an estimated cost of €51 billion when announced in 2003.*

*Due to Dubai's financial crisis, the development was put on hold in 2008. September 20, 2016, from Garden of Delight.*





*On the previous page: Saudi tourists are having a hot chocolate at Chillout Ice Lounge, a sub-zero bar at Oasis Mall. January 6, 2016, from Garden of Delight.  
On the left: Toktoqul, Kyrgyzstan, from Red Journey.  
Above: Aralsh, Kazakhstan, from Red Journey.*