

URBAN DEVELOPMENT AND SECLUDED UNIVERSES

Interview with Belgian Photographer

NICK HANNES

By Boré Kedober

Nick Hannes is a photographer based in Ranst, Belgium. Born in Antwerp in 1974, he graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent in 1997. After eight years working on assignments as a photojournalist, he decided to fully concentrate on self-initiated documentary projects.

His work has a strong political and social component, and often deals with the problematic relationship that we have with our environment. His style is characterized by the use of irony, ambiguity and visual metaphors.

Hannes' new series 'Garden of Delight' deals with the entertainment industry in Dubai, and was awarded the Magnum Photography Award in 2017 and the Zeiss Photography Award in 2018. It will be published in a book in 2018.

The Brussels Times sat down with Hannes to learn more about his photo documentary style, philosophy and projects.





The theme park Global Village consists of replicas of landmark buildings and shopping pavilions representing 75 countries. The buildings are changed every season to ensure repeat visitors get a different experience each time they travel here.

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In 2017 you won the Magnum Photography Award for the Dubai series, followed by the Zeiss Photography Award in 2018. What inspired you to work on this project and what did you hope to achieve with it?

I'm fascinated about how cities are developed and the dynamics behind urbanisation. Those topics were also featuring in my previous project "Mediterranean: The Continuity of Man".

When I travelled around the Mediterranean coastline, I saw a lot of gated tourist resorts and closed-off neighbourhoods. To me they almost resemble

fortified cities. Inside it feels very safe and relaxed, and everything is under control, nobody needs to be afraid. It's like an island or a bubble.

Dubai is full of those examples - little islands or secluded universes - I like to call them capsules. It can be a shopping mall, a theme park or even a nightclub at a hotel. In other words, places where people go to have fun. The bottom-line I'm getting at is that the urbanisation in Dubai is not organic but market driven and completely revolves around money. In fact, I recently changed the title of the project; it will be called "Garden of delight", a reference to the aspect of entertainment in Dubai.



Emirati boys playing a game of pool at Hub Zero, a gaming and entertainment complex in Dubai.



Portrait of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, ruler of Dubai, at the Dubai Royal Equestrian Club.

Do you feel that people in Dubai question the lifestyle of its society and the political decisions. Is there any internal debate?

No, there is no public debate at all in Dubai. Nobody questions it. Whatever happens in Dubai is the will of the Sheikh, the ruler, and he is very popular because he distributes the country's wealth. However, only 10% of the population are in fact Emiratis. The rest are expats. These 10% receive a lot of material possessions and privileges so they are happy and that's why there is no criticism.

I think the Dubaians are satisfied with their lives. They are proud of the stability and often point to the turmoil in the surrounding countries in the region. The foreign workers who would have more reason to be critical, do not protest, simply for the fact that they'd be expelled. They are like modern slaves.

“In the press, the most important is to get the story, while my stories are more about the background behind the headlines.”

A private driver is pushing a shopping cart with a toy Ferrari at the car park of Oasis Mall in Dubai.





Prototype of the Floating Seahorse, an underwater holiday villa with butler, located at The World, a manmade archipelago in the Persian Gulf. The villa features underwater bedrooms and bathrooms with floor-to-ceiling windows that allow for submarine views. 90 Floating Seahorses, costing €2.5 million each, are planned to be built.



A gardener is watering palm trees at a car park in Dubai.

“I use humour to capture the viewer’s attention and once they start to look closer, they see there is another level to it, maybe something more serious.”

Do you plan to hold the exhibition in Dubai?

No, I don’t think I’ll show it in Dubai. For now, the complete work will be shown for the first time here in Belgium in December at De Garage in Mechelen. It’s a work made for the public in the West. However, if there is an opportunity, it could be interesting and I wouldn’t object. Having said that, many pictures of the nightlife might not be appreciated, although it is not a secret that partying and drinking goes on, especially amongst the tourists and expats.

Many of your pictures are humorous at first sight while they seem to portray serious issues. Is this part of a conscious effort in your work?

Yes, it’s on purpose. I think there is a lot of photography out there that show strong images of misery and suffering. However, I’m looking for a different way to tell my stories. So I use humour to capture the viewer’s attention and once they start to look closer, they see there is another level to it, maybe something more serious. So while my pictures are humorous, they deal with serious issues.

However, I don’t just use humour but also think a lot about composition. I try to make a well-balanced composition, which make the pictures easy and “pleasant” to look at. That’s part of the aesthetics. So I use humour and aesthetics to capture the attention, and then behind that one finds the underlying issue, for example an ongoing conflict, urban environmental issues or migration.



"I attended the wedding party of Anna (26) and Christos Karalis (44) in Rio, Greece. Christos, who owns a petrol station, decided to have the party at his workplace, in order to save on party expenses. This is the middle class, suffering from the severe austerity measures implemented in recent years"

You started out your career as a press photographer reporting on conflicts around the world and eventually started doing your own documentary projects. How has your photography style evolved?

As a press photographer, you are really supposed to be in the middle of the action and show the news and how the events are unfolding. While as a documentary photographer, I can spend more time and take some distance.

Basically, I don't have to chase the news. In the press, the most important is to get the story, while my stories are more about the background behind the headlines. There are more layers in the pictures. Previously as a press photographer I was realising someone else's ideas. Now I'm the author of the story and this gives me much more satisfaction.

Also, most of the time my images are more "quiet" and much more open to interpretation. For me that's very important. I like to let people decide or rather force people to reflect and think for themselves.

In my work, I don't want to be moralistic or pretend that I show the truth. I do choose the objects in the images but what I show is more my concerns about the world, so it's a personal concern for the world and how we relate to the environment.

I think we are reaching critical social and ecological borderlines and are asking for trouble. The way we live is not sustainable at the moment, especially in cities such as Dubai. So in a way, my work is about raising awareness.

Go go dancers in a gilded cage in a nightclub in Dubai.





The anti-immigrant fence in Ceuta, a Spanish enclave in Morocco. Nick Hannes: "My series on the Mediterranean region is not about refugees. It's about us, and how we try to keep them out by all means, and protect our 'Fortress Europe.'"

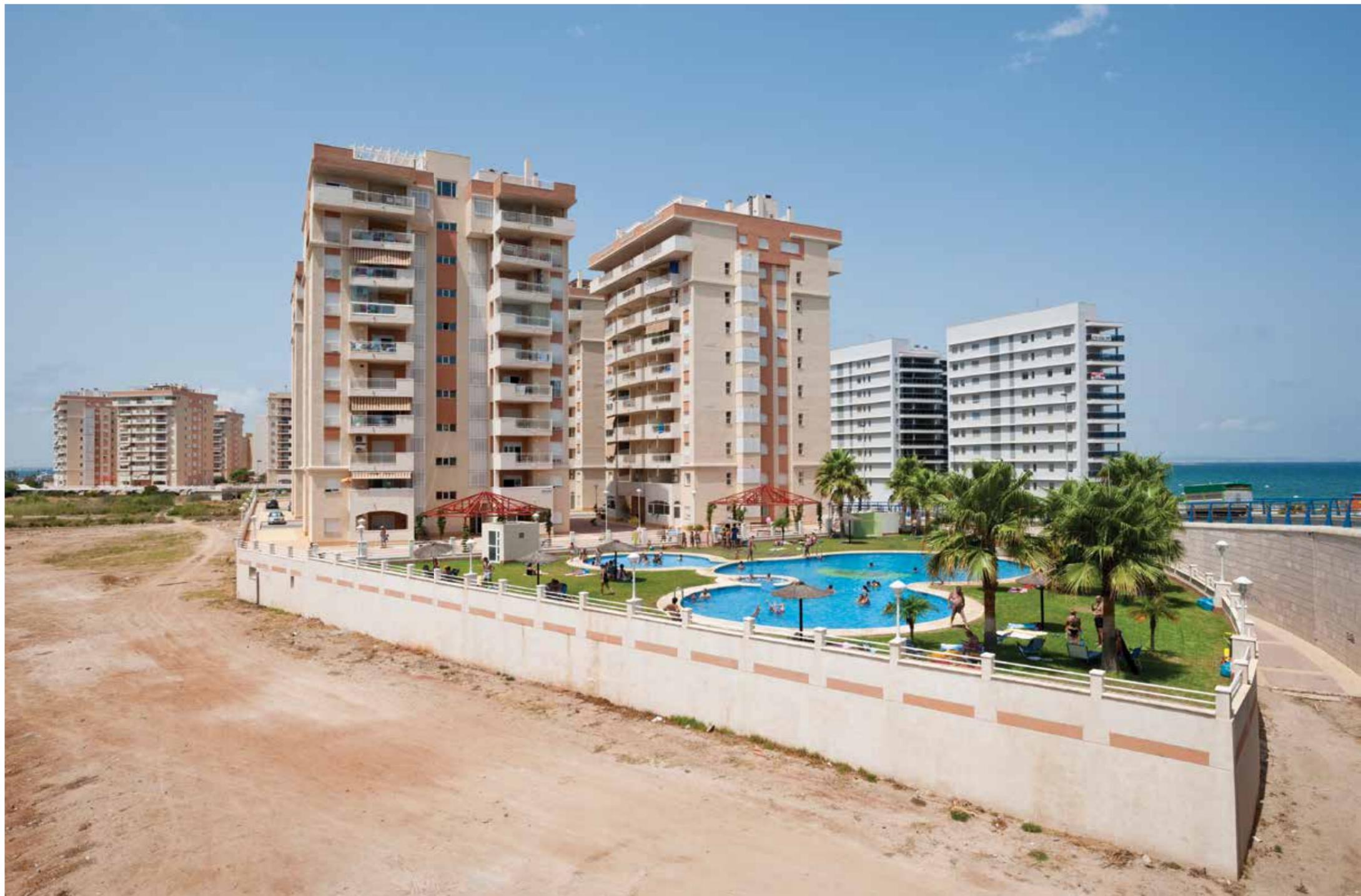
What did you learn from your trips around the Mediterranean Sea in your project Mediterranean - The Continuity of Man?

The idea behind the book came from me wanting to revisit the time when it was part of the Roman empire, a kind of unified region and a crossroad. Today it is full of conflicts and front lines and a very explosive region, especially when I carried out the project between 2010 and 2014. The Arab Spring and the migration crisis over the sea were breaking out.

The title of that project "The continuity of man" is a bit ironic when you look at the realities on the Mediterranean shores. You cannot see that the continuity of man is in progress or going in the right direction. That was the impression that I was left with from the project.

You once said that you aim to go "hunting for coincidences" in your projects. Can you explain what you meant?

It sounds contradictory because a coincidence just happens and you can't plan for it. But what I meant to say is more about being ready. For that you need to use all your senses and be aware that strange things can happen all the time. I think sometimes you can predict a certain situation, foreseeing something and then you need to be ready to shoot at that moment. This is also why I don't intervene in any events. If I can freeze a moment and capture that sudden magic of the moment, it really gives me complete satisfaction. That magic would be gone if I had staged the images.



"This tourist resort in La Manga del Mar Menor in Spain reminded me of a fortified city, or a citadel. It's an example of capsular architecture: Inside one can relax in safety, without interference from unpredictable encounters."

What projects are you currently working on and plan for the future?

I will probably continue to work on the same topics. Urban stories and dynamics and how cities are built and expanded, but at the moment I am not sure where in the world exactly.

To see more of Nick Hannes' work, visit his website: www.nickhannes.be

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