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Foster to build sun city in desert

[Robert Booth](#)

LORD FOSTER, the architect, is to harness the desert sun to create the world's first city powered entirely by renewable energy.

Its 50,000 residents, in the Gulf emirate of Abu Dhabi, will live on streets modelled on traditional souks and medinas — but draped with shades of fabric that convert sunlight into electricity.

At 71, Foster is entering the most influential phase of his career. He is completing the world's largest airport at Beijing in time for next year's Olympic Games; designing a canal to refill the Dead Sea from the Red Sea; and last week he sold a minority stake in his practice that values it at about £300m.

Abu Dhabi's experiment contrasts with Dubai, the neighbouring emirate with smaller oil reserves, which is building a city of glass, steel and concrete towers reliant on energy-hungry air conditioning.

In Abu Dhabi's green city, canals will run alongside the streets, some of which will be only 10ft wide to protect pedestrians from the heat, which averages more than 40C in the shade in the summer. In the desert outside Masdar City — “the source” in Arabic — fields of mirrors will focus the sun's rays to drive a solar power station. Wind turbines will catch breezes from the Gulf.

Plantations of palm and mangrove will create a green belt around the city to provide the raw material for bio-fuels, a new industry that may one day supplement oil and gas revenues.

The tiny emirate is the fifth largest exporter of oil in the world, but it is envisaged that Masdar City will not need a drop. “We want to position ourselves as thinkers and progressives,” said Sultan Al Jaber, the chief executive of Masdar, the company set up by the government to manage the project.

“Years ago in the Middle East we lived in a very sustainable environment. We are bringing that back by creating a compact city where people don't need to use a car.”

Abu Dhabi is in competition with Dongtan in China, which is trying to create the world's first zero-carbon city on an island at the mouth of the Yangtze. The emirate believes it will win the race.

“We are seeing a transition from the industrial age of human civilisation to the ecological age,” said Peter Head, a director of Arup, the British engineering firm that is building Dongtan.