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Burj Khalifa floors its critics

There was immense global interest in this engineering achievement, although some would term it an extravagance.

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The extraordinary Burj Khalifa is complete! The Emirati dream of building the tallest inhabited structure in the world, has been realised. Sadly, I was unable to be in Dubai for the grand opening ceremony.

However, there was immense global interest in this engineering achievement, although some would term it an extravagance. At the moment when the fireworks went up, I was watching the event on a television screen in a small South African township near Cape Town where I had been helping a disadvantaged African community develop a leatherwork studio. And all I saw on those faces was wonder and admiration.

Was there any sign of envy or resentment as the cameras focused on the rich and powerful who have bought luxury accommodation in the Burj? Not that I could see or hear. There appeared to be genuine admiration and respect for those who conceived, designed and built such an edifice.

Later, on the plane back to England, I sat next to a very serious American student, and she was critical of the Burj and kept repeating her view that millions of dollars should not be wasted on unnecessary, high-profile projects. She reiterated the argument about the ever widening gap between rich and poor.

I mentioned that I had just spent a week among some of the poorest people in South Africa, and that they did not seem to show any negative reactions to the Burj, but on the contrary, were truly impressed.

Sneering at the effort

On landing in London, I had to make a dash to a TV studio, where I was on a discussion panel with five other journalists. As I arrived, they were deep into a lively debate about the Burj. They, too, were critical, but in quite a different way from the American girl. I realised that they were just being patronising about a technological achievement that had been built, not in London, but in the sands of the UAE.

The discussion was more of a contest to see who could be the most disdainful, using words such as 'hubris', 'imperial', 'giant hypodermic needle' and 'the last gasp'.

These were the same commentators who during the boom had written thousands of words on the extraordinary miracle that was Dubai.

Of course, they ignored that there is no unemployment in the UAE and virtually no crime — and the potential of the UAE economy is strong.

So, three very different reactions from three kinds of people. And who do I feel most kinship with? The American girl or perhaps those bright, cynical TV panellists competing to utter the slickest 'put-down' phrase?

No, neither of these! My money is on those Africans on the township who felt deeply that they were watching an extraordinary example of modern technology that had never before been achieved.

Facts: Towering glory

- The world's tallest building has drawn both criticism and praise.
- It is fashionable to protest on behalf of the poor, about unnecessary luxury.
- The under-privileged seem to respond well to grand achievements.

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