

November 26, 2010

Building Museums, and a Fresh Arab Identity

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ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates — It is an audacious experiment: two small, oil-rich countries in the Middle East are using architecture and art to reshape their national identities virtually overnight, and in the process to redeem the tarnished image of Arabs abroad while showing the way toward a modern society within the boundaries of Islam.

Here, on a barren island on the outskirts of Abu Dhabi, workers have dug the foundations for three colossal museums: an \$800 million [Frank Gehry](#)-designed branch of the Guggenheim 12 times the size of its New York flagship; a half-billion-dollar outpost of the [Louvre](#) by [Jean Nouvel](#); and a showcase for national history by Foster & Partners, the design for which was unveiled on Thursday. And plans are moving ahead for yet another museum, about maritime history, to be designed by [Tadao Ando](#).

Nearly 200 miles across the Persian Gulf, Doha, the capital of Qatar, has been mapping out its own extravagant cultural vision. A Museum of Islamic Art, a bone-white [I. M. Pei](#)-designed temple, [opened in 2008](#) and dazzled the international museum establishment. In December the government will open a museum of modern Arab art with a collection that spans the mid-19th-century to the present. Construction has just begun on a museum of Qatari history, also by Mr. Nouvel, and the design for a museum of Orientalist art by the Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron is to be made public next year.

To a critic traveling through the region, the speed at which museums are being built in Abu Dhabi — and the international brand names attached to some of them — conjured culture-flavored versions of the overwrought real-estate spectacles that famously shaped its fellow emirate, Dubai.

By contrast, Doha's vision seemed a more calculated attempt to find a balance between modernization and Islam.

But in both cases leaders also see their construction sprees as part of sweeping efforts to retool their societies for a post-Sept. 11, post-oil world. Their goal is not only to build a more positive image of the Middle East at a time when anti-Islamic sentiment continues to build across Europe and the United States, but also to create a kind of latter-day Silk Road, one on which their countries are powerful cultural and economic hinges between the West and rising powers like India and China.

And they are betting that they can do this without alienating significant parts of the Arab world, which may see in these undertakings the same kind of Western-oriented cosmopolitanism that flourished in places like Cairo and Tehran not so long ago, and that helped fuel the rise of militant fundamentalism.

Building a New Narrative

A little over a half-century ago Abu Dhabi was a Bedouin village with no literary or scientific traditions to speak of, no urban history. Its few thousand inhabitants, mostly poor and illiterate, survived largely on animal herding, fishing and pearl diving.

After oil production began here in the 1960s, [Sheik Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahayan](#), who founded the country by bringing several emirates together under Abu Dhabi's leadership in the early 1970s, made deals with Western oil companies that financed the area's first paved roads, hospitals and schools. The emirates became a kind of Switzerland of the Middle East, a haven of calm and prosperity surrounded by big, aggressive neighbors, Iran and Iraq to the north and Saudi Arabia to the west.

But by the time Sheik Zayed's descendants began coming to power in the 1990s, that low-key approach felt out of date. Globalism was the catchword of the moment, and the construction boom in neighboring Dubai was demonstrating, despite its later bust, how completely a city could transform itself in just a few years.

As important, reliance on economic ties with the West began to seem imprudent after Sept. 11, as Western governments scrutinized all sorts of Arab financial dealings with increasing intensity, and even travel to the West became a sometimes degrading experience for Arabs.

In 2005 Sheikh Zayed's son and heir, Sheik Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahayan, approached [Thomas Krens](#), who was the director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in New York, with the idea of creating a new branch of the [Guggenheim Museum](#) — a Middle Eastern version of what Mr. Krens and Mr. Gehry had accomplished a decade earlier in Bilbao, Spain. But the sheik's ambitions were never so small: within a few years the proposed site of the project, [Saadiyat Island](#), a 10-square-mile development zone just north of Abu Dhabi's urban center, was being planned as a miniature city built around culture and leisure, with some of the most recognizable names from the creative world.

Abu Dhabi's blockbuster deal with the Louvre was signed in 2007; another deal, with the [British Museum](#), to design exhibitions for Foster & Partners' Zayed National Museum, was signed two years later. The maritime museum by Mr. Ando and a performing arts center by [Zaha Hadid](#) are still being planned. These cultural megaprojects will be joined by a campus of [New York University](#) on Saadiyat Island's southern shore and, in a location to be determined, a four-million-square-foot development for media companies and film studios meant partly to provide job training and opportunities for young Emiratis.

Sheik Khalifa and his government want all this to instill national pride in a new generation of Emiratis while providing citizens with tools, both intellectual and psychological, for living in a global society. The idea, several people told me on a recent visit, is to tell a new story, one that breaks with a long history of regional decline, including the recent upheavals caused by militant fundamentalism, and to re-establish a semblance of cultural parity with the West.

“There are religious extremists everywhere in the Middle East — even here,” said an Arab consultant who has worked on several developments and spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of being fired. The sheik, this person said, believes the cosmopolitan influences of the projects may help “open up the minds of these younger Emiratis before they go down that road.”

Of all the projects, the Louvre outpost seems the most natural fit with Abu Dhabi’s globalist aspirations. On top of a generous construction budget, the government is paying France \$1.3 billion, mainly to establish an art-borrowing agreement that will ensure that it gets the pick of the Louvre’s encyclopedic collections, as well as art from several other museums. The range and depth of those collections will allow the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which is being marketed as a “universal museum,” to show off the cultural achievements of civilizations from every corner of the world.

And Mr. Nouvel’s design for this museum — a maze of gallery buildings and canals, all covered by a huge stainless-steel dome — is a wonderfully romantic evocation of a Middle East at ease with technology. Sunlight will penetrate its perforated skin, creating hundreds of beams that recall the interiors of great mosques, or even the filtering of light through the tree canopies in an oasis. Tucked under the dome, the galleries and their watery setting refer to Venice — an emblem, Mr. Nouvel has said, of the fertile cultural crosscurrents that once existed between East and West.

Globalism or Colonialism?

But while the Louvre will be able to draw on thousands of years of shifting cultural influences, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, which is focused on 1965 to the present, a period culturally dominated by the West, reveals the problems that arise when the political message you are trying to send collides with historical reality.

Mr. Krens envisioned a “global museum” that nonetheless seemed to acknowledge the primacy of Western contemporary art. The museum — from the outside, a chaotic pileup of translucent cones and gigantic children’s building blocks — was organized around a cluster of first-floor galleries representing key movements in Europe and the United States. Islamic collections would be housed two floors above, while warehouselike galleries would radiate out from the core, each devoted to a different region — the Far East, India, Africa. The plan’s Western bent didn’t fly for the clients, or for [Richard Armstrong](#), who replaced Mr. Krens as the director of the Guggenheim Foundation in 2008.

Nine months ago Mr. Armstrong began developing an alternative plan, in which artists from all over the world would be grouped together in theme galleries: abstract art, Pop Art, performance art and so on. Even in this scheme, however, Mr. Armstrong admits that galleries will end up being organized around major anchor pieces that are, by and large, by blue-chip Western artists like [Andy Warhol](#), [Robert Rauschenberg](#) and Anselm Kiefer.

The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi has a team of three curators working in New York to build a collection with a budget of up to \$600 million, more than 200 times the annual acquisitions budget of the Guggenheim in Manhattan. But they need to be done in time for the museum’s opening in just three years — a time frame that many people in the museum world regard as absurdly short.

Similar issues arose with the plan for the Zayed National Museum, the institution that most directly speaks to the country's identity. The museum was intended to explore the United Arab Emirates' relatively sparse historical record through the life of Sheik Zayed, a man known for his humility, who died in 2004. Yet after [Norman Foster](#) presented his initial design proposal, in 2007, he was told that the country's leadership wanted something grander, even though there was still no clear idea of what, exactly, would go inside.

Mr. Foster was sent back to the drawing board, and a team of curators from the British Museum worked out an exhibition program. The new design features an enormous landscaped mound capped by five featherlike wind towers — the tallest one rising 300 feet — an attempt to evoke falconry, a favorite pastime of Arab royals.

That the collections of both the Guggenheim and the National Museum are being planned in the West raises a larger issue: while the money for all these developments comes from Emirati oil, the projects themselves are being shaped almost exclusively by foreigners. Abu Dhabi has become a revolving door of museum directors, architects, curators and other high-level consultants, and the hectic pace at which their plans are being pushed through has contributed to a sense among some here that what is being touted as a societywide embrace of global culture will end up being just another example of cultural colonialism.

The Media Zone will have a similarly strong international flavor. The government hopes that its mix of corporate offices and production studios will attract foreign news companies, as well as Bollywood studios. And an early design — clusters of sleekly contoured towers set atop six superblocks — involved a whole cast of celebrated Western architects, including [Bernard Tschumi](#), Diller Scofidio & Renfro and UNStudio.

Just east of the city's museum district, workers have broken ground on a 27-acre New York University campus, vaguely Beaux-Arts in plan, where classes will be taught in English and where there will be no quotas ensuring that Emiratis or other Arabs are given a significant number of places.

Insiders and Outsiders

The Arab world has been down a similar road. An earlier wave of Western consultants — businessmen, foreign service types, engineers and architects — poured into the Middle East in the 1950s and '60s, selling a cold war brand of modernity that would uplift Arab societies, in particular by fostering a thriving middle class. In practice the changes often simply reinforced divisions between a privileged elite — modern, educated, in tune with the West — and a struggling underclass, something that was not a small factor in the rise of fundamentalist violence.

No one would claim that a country as small and rich as the United Arab Emirates has the same combustible mix of social problems as, say, Egypt or Iran, but there are obvious echoes when you consider whom these cultural megaprojects will probably serve.

The new museums will be embedded in a kind of suburban opulence that can be found all over the Middle East, but rarely in such isolation and on such an expansive scale as in Abu Dhabi. The concrete frames of a new St. Regis hotel and resort and a Park Hyatt are rising just down the coast from the museum district, along Saadiyat Beach. Nearby, a 2,000-home walled community is going up along an 18-hole golf course designed by [Gary Player](#), to be joined eventually by several more luxury residential developments and two marinas for hundreds of yachts. A tram will loop around Saadiyat, connecting these developments to the museums.

As telling, in its way, is the Workers' Village that I was taken to see during a tour of the island. The camp, still under construction, is expected to house 40,000 foreigners brought in to build this paradise.

It is neatly divided into three-story prefabricated housing blocks, which are interspersed with pretty courtyards. A two-story structure, just off one of the courtyards, serves as a communal hall, with dining on the ground floor and a library upstairs with books arranged by language: Arabic, Hindi, Nepalese, Tamil, Malaysian. The same languages blare from TV rooms off a balcony.

In some sense this village embodies a version of the cosmopolitanism Abu Dhabi says it is trying to create. But even if it is completed as planned, it will house only a small fraction of the city's hundreds of thousands of migrant laborers; the rest will presumably live in cramped quarters in the city's industrial sector or in faraway desert encampments. And once the museums are completed, a spokesman for the government development agency told me, it will be bulldozed to make room for more hotels and luxury housing.

Arabic Tradition in Qatar

Doha, like Abu Dhabi, was built from a small trading village into a city of about a million in the last 50 years. But both the museums being built around Doha and the art and artifacts to which they are dedicated — private collections amassed over decades by members of the ruling family — reflect a more patient, gradual approach to culture building than that of Abu Dhabi, and one that looks less to the West. If the cultural identities that both cities are trying to create are to some extent fictions, Doha's is one woven largely of the cosmopolitan traditions of the region — that is, of places like Damascus, Istanbul and Cairo.

The three major Qatari national collections were assembled by the emir's cousins Sheik Hassan al-Thani and Sheik Saud al-Thani, who began collecting in the 1980s, when art was still viewed as dubious, even unmanly, among the country's elites.

"If I talked about modern art, no one understood me," Sheik Hassan told me when we met in Doha. "It was impossible to even start this conversation."

In the 1990s a new emir, Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, began to liberalize many institutions and to open the door cautiously to the outside world. In 1995 he announced plans for Education City: a sprawling campus whose programs are now run by American universities like [Texas A&M](#) and Georgetown, but with agreements to ensure that a large proportion of its students are Qatari nationals. A year later he established the news network [Al Jazeera](#).

The museum projects were also part of this liberalization effort. After Sheik Saud agreed to donate his collection of Islamic art to the state, Sheik Hamad hired Mr. Pei to design a building for it. When the resulting Museum of Islamic Art opened, it was celebrated as a successful Modernist interpretation of Islamic precedents, from the ablution fountain of the Ibn Tulun mosque in Cairo to old Islamic fortresses in North Africa. Its monumental forms express Mr. Pei's ideal of a world in which modernity and tradition exist in perfect balance.

As striking as Mr. Pei's architecture, however, was the obvious subtext of the collection, whose treasures range from Iraqi ceramics to Spanish silk curtains and Indian jewelry. If these pieces were assembled with an eye to exploring the richness of Islamic art — and the historic reach of Islam — their presentation was also a way to emphasize the cultural crosscurrents that produced them. The message, directed at both local and foreign audiences, is that much of what is great in Western, Eastern and Middle Eastern traditions is based on their connections to one another.

“My father often says, in order to have peace, we need to first respect each other’s cultures,” said [Sheika al-Mayassa Bint Hamad Al Thani](#), the emir’s 28-year-old daughter and the main force behind the museum building program in Qatar. “And people in the West don’t understand the Middle East. They come with bin Laden in their heads.”

The museums, she hopes, will help “to change that mind-set.”

The newer national collections, parts of which will be unveiled to the public over the next few months, will take that idea into more provocative territory. The Orientalism collection in particular seems like an improbable focus for a museum in the Arab world. The collection, displayed in a town house until its new home is completed, centers on depictions of Arab life by 19th-century French and English artists. In one room a caricature of a squatting North African warrior hangs near a painting of Algerian women performing a seductive dance. There are also portraits of sultans and pashas by Italian artists, extending back to the 16th century, when the cultural scales were tipping away from the [Ottoman Empire](#) and toward Renaissance Europe.

To a Westerner, the 19th-century paintings can be especially uncomfortable — they present what now seem clichés of Arab life that reflect back our own prejudices. But to many Arabs they are also vividly detailed historical records of a period that is otherwise undocumented. Realistic painting did not exist then in the Arab world; photography was not common until the late 19th century. As Sheik Hassan saw it when he was building the collection, these were the only records of a life that was fast fading from memory.

“I recognize this life,” Sheik Hassan said. “The sheik sitting in his tent, I know these costumes are 100 percent right — even the tint of the button. The hare, it is from North Africa.”

The paintings are not simply relics of cultural imperialism, he added. “You should think of all of this as part of a cultural movement, an exchange of ideas.”

Still, by shining a light into the darker corners of Arab history, as well as at its ancient glories, the Orientalist museum suggests an understanding — rare anywhere — that the foundations of any healthy culture must be built on an unflinching appraisal of the past. Rather than airbrush that past, the government intends to put it up to public scrutiny.

A similar impulse is shaping Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, which will open in a temporary home at the end of December. When I first visited the collection, which was still in storage, I felt the weight of the West’s cultural influence in frequent derivative references to artists like [Picasso](#). Just as many works, however, were inspired expressions of the artist’s struggle to come to terms with that influence without losing touch with his or her own identity.

Piecing together the fragments of that 20th-century history and linking them to present-day Qatar will be one of the museum’s core missions, said Wassan al-Khudhairi, its Iraqi-born director, as she gave a tour of the rooms. “Baghdad, Cairo, Beirut, North Africa, Syria, Jordan,” she said. “This is the culture.”

Not that Doha is overlooking its own less glamorous past. In contrast to Mr. Foster’s evocation of the sport of Arabian kings in Abu Dhabi’s National Museum, Mr. Nouvel’s design for the Qatar National Museum draws on the forms of local sand roses: tiny pink encrustations buried just under the desert’s surface. The building will be composed of clusters of concrete discs that seem to have tumbled across the site, gently encircling a palm-shaded courtyard. Inside, displays of tents, fabrics, saddles and other objects, as well as enormous video screens that will immerse the visitor in the experience of the desert, are meant to convey both the humble origins of Qatar’s royal family and the nobility of Bedouin life.

Like all of Doha's new cultural buildings, the National Museum is being carefully integrated into the city, rather than set apart in a special zone. It will be built within the boundaries of the original settlement, now the city's center, on the site of an early-20th-century palace of a former emir. Mr. Pei's Museum of Islamic Art, though on a man-made island, stands just off the corniche, not far from the old souks. The government is considering several downtown sites for the permanent home of Mathaf.

Radical Social Transformation

Doha's methodical approach to culture building is echoed in an even broader plan to re-engineer the demographics of the city, according to Stan Wypych, an Australian consultant for the city's planning authority. The population of Doha is expected to grow to 2.3 million by 2032. By then, with the current construction boom over, the bulk of its 700,000 laborers, mostly from South and Southeast Asia, will have gone home, replaced, the government hopes, with the kind of educated, white-collar workers whom it sees as the future of the new society.

Some of these new professionals would be housed in places like Lusail City, a 14-square-mile district of apartment towers, villas and marinas under construction at the city's edge. Other developments, designed with more traditional courtyards and within walking distance of mosques or plazas, are being marketed to Arabs, including Qataris who fled the city to suburban villas decades ago, as part of an effort to entice them to the historic city center. The idea is to integrate the new expatriates without sacrificing Doha's Arab character.

"The social transformation is pretty radical," Mr. Wypych said. "It's happening pretty fast."

As comprehensive as this vision seems, however, questions still linger, as in Abu Dhabi, about whom it will speak to. Few fundamentalists are likely to distinguish between one approach to modernization and another. Even many educated Arabs in and outside Qatar — among the museums' target audience — see a disturbing inconsistency in these grand plans.

"Some have lived here 50 years," said Fares Braizat, a Jordanian professor at Qatar University who has been working on a census of foreign nationals. "They speak Arabic with a Qatari dialect, but they are still not allowed Qatari citizenship" or any of the enviable perks that go with it: free education and health care, interest-free government loans, preference in hiring, a sense of equality.

Mr. Braizat's point zeroes in on what could turn out to be the great flaw in the plans of both cities. Leaders are investing enormous amounts in these projects, and they are likely to leave behind some extraordinary buildings and institutions. But if they can't get over that final hurdle and persuade enough people that they have a shared stake in this future, they will never realize their most ambitious goals. Worse, they may end up reinforcing the cynicism about engagement with the West that brought down Western-style modernism in this part of the world decades ago.