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The Contextual Linkage: Visual Metaphors And Analogies In Recent Gulf Museums' Architecture

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The contextual linkage: visual metaphors and analogies in recent Gulf museums' architecture

Museums that have recently been completed in the Gulf present a recurrent strategy. The emphasis is often on the container rather than the content. In this framework, architecture is the language that, through visual metaphors alluding to local traditions, generates a contextual linkage and a sense of place. Therefore, none of these latest museums is designed as a building. Instead, it is a desert rose, a falcon's feather, a sail, or any other reference to Gulf iconography. The present text analyses the meaning of symbolic language in architecture by comparing a series of case studies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), culminating with Jean Nouvel's antipodal proposals for the National Museum in Qatar and the Louvre Abu Dhabi. The paper argues that the validation of buildings through visual allusions to locality is a recurrent feature of recent Gulf museums, as a response to a fluid context in constant adjustment on the tradition-modernity axis.

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Introduction

The majority of museums which have recently been completed in the Gulf seem to follow a predetermined pattern. The emphasis is on the container and the paradigm starchitect-evocative building-branding campaign, shifting most of the museological considerations to a subsequent stage. This strategy produces symbols that can be decoded and accepted worldwide. It also projects, on the one hand, the reliable profile of a progressive society on the global political stage and, on the other hand, the governments' intents to promote the national(istic) image of a civilisation rich in traditions and history.¹ The construction of new museum facilities is part of a wider programme of preservation and promotion of cultural heritage in the region. In the early 2000s, wherein at different paces, all the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries began investing in the development of the cultural heritage industry aiming to attract tourism, and, in turn, to begin diversifying the state's source of income, which traditionally relies on oil export. The strategy included a variety of actions: archaeological missions; the organisation of cultural festivals; the

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participation in international exhibits and events; the financial support to think-tanks, study programmes abroad and scholarships in cultural disciplines; and, finally, the construction of tourist attractions such as museums and cultural centres.

In this framework, architecture is chosen as the language that can permeate the media worldwide, in particular, through the use of visual metaphors that allude to localism and cultural specificity. For this reason, none of the latest state museums is designed to look like a building or generated in relation to the urban context. Instead, it is a desert rose, a parcel, a falcon's feather, a sail, a desert dune, or any other references to Gulf–Arab–*Khaleeji* iconography that can be easily deciphered both regionally and internationally. These architectural symbols, however, as will be articulated later, have shown themselves to be somewhat vague, and their isolation from the urban fabric as stand-alone, unique objects makes their site-specificity questionable. In general terms, the essay examines the design dynamics that occur when global architectural practice meets local conditions in non-Western contexts. On the one hand, when an architects' proposal is an abstract, prosaic and neutral structure, it can be perceived as insensitive to the local context, and therefore as a means of *westernisation*, a form of neo-colonial practices and, in many cases, insufficient to meet the client's expectations. On the other hand, when the concept metaphorically refers to or reinterprets elements of locality or traditions, it is either a cultural appropriation, *vernacularisation* or an apologetic, de-colonial tactic.

Building on this dichotomy, this paper initially investigates the current role of cultural institutions both at the global scale and more specifically in the Gulf. Subsequently, it will briefly explore and illustrate the relationship between museums and the use of figurative language in architecture. This analysis provides the basis of categorisations that are later applied to a series of case studies in the region, from celebrated architectures to lesser-known or unbuilt proposals for museums and cultural centres, culminating with the examination of Jean Nouvel's antithetical proposals for the Qatar National Museum and the Louvre Abu Dhabi (Fig. 1).

The paper argues that, in particular with the Gulf's recent museum projects, there has been a persistent recourse to direct or indirect metaphorical language to create a contextual linkage, which justifies the resulting architecture, despite the numerous foreign inputs, as acceptable in terms of locality and cultural specificity to the region. The vast literature on the subject is mostly concerned with processes of identity-making, nation-building, globalisation versus tradition or *westernisation*, leaving the architectural language as a consequence. However, the present essay investigates how the symbol is manifested, by foregrounding the designer's perspective.

New Persuaders

Every year since 2011, the magazine *Monocle* and the UK based think-tank Institute for Government elaborate the *Global Ranking of Soft Power*,



which was initially published after the suggestive title *The New Persuaders*. The study aims to establish how influential a given nation is on the world's geopolitical stage, as well as in the global market, by analysing criteria such as the educational system, political values, innovative resources, the culture, and the diplomatic infrastructure. Following James Nye's seminal studies, the Ranking breaks down one country's performance into metrics that indicate its ability to influence other partners by means of attraction and persuasion, which is defined as soft power, rather than economic or military pressure.² The cultural sub-index, in particular, takes into consideration aspects such as the annual number of visiting tourists; the outreach of state media or the film and music industry; the international sporting success; the local heritage recognition in the world list; as well as art-related events attendance.

The United Arab Emirates entered the Ranking in 2012 in the 38th place as the only Gulf country to make the top 40.³ By the end of the decade, the UAE

Figure 1.
Northeast elevation of Louvre Abu
Dhabi, UAE, 2017, by Ateliers Jean
Nouvel, photographed by the
author, 2022

Figure 2.
Tweet by H. H. Sheikh Mohammed al Maktoum, ruler of Dubai, celebrating UAE 18th place in the 2020 Global Soft Power Ranking



was named top soft power in the Middle East and 18th across the world, with Qatar ranking 31st (Fig. 2).⁴

These performances reflect the general perception of places such as Dubai or Doha as reliable investment hubs for global capital, but also as locations shaped by visionary plans that attract international talent to produce world-class events. With the complicity of regional political instability outside the Gulf, the noticeable result is a shift in the cultural paradigm from cities traditionally regarded as more representative, such as Beirut, Cairo, and Damascus, to Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Manama, and Doha.⁵

Although there have been adjustments in the ranking procedure and alternations of the institutions publishing the study over the years, the general trend also indicates the effort exerted by the Gulf countries in the realm of art and heritage promotion, which would eventually result in the 'golden age of museum in the Persian Gulf', as noted by one of this paper's protagonists, architect Jean Nouvel.⁶ The frenzy of museum building started in the first decade of the 2000s with the presentation of Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island project in 2007 and the inauguration of Doha's Museum of Islamic Art in October 2008, but was consolidated in the second decade, after the financial

crisis, with more than a dozen world-class museums completed in the region. Nouvel reads the situation in terms of wealth and self-representation:

Any time a country experiences a period of great economic prosperity, it becomes reflected in its culture, in its cities, in its capital, and translates into architecture, big buildings, big museums [...] it is normal that there should be buildings symbolising this golden age.⁷

The museum's bloom in the Arabian Peninsula has to be read as part of a worldwide trend. According to UNESCO, in the last 40 years, the number of museums worldwide has increased by more than 400%.⁸ It has improved from an estimate of 22,000 units in 1975 to 95,000 in the present day due to the fact that their primary function has evolved from simply being a repository of artworks and an educational institution to becoming a city's showpiece, contributing to the image of the whole country and an increase in its prestige. Museums have assumed multiple roles ranging from education to entertainment, identity representation, interpretations of traditions and social changes, debating local and global perspectives, fostering a sense of belonging, and often contributing to nation-building.⁹

For this reason, according to Guido Guerzoni, current museums are affected by 'performance anxiety'.¹⁰ At one end, they have to deal with all the financial demands of sponsors, patrons, investors, and state authorities. And at the other end, they are expected to entertain and meet obligations dictated by traditional and social media. In particular, over the last 20 years, museums have been transformed into the 'panacea of every city's ills, the Viagra that could raise the morale and revive the sex-appeal of old and unattractive places, the philosopher's stone that would turn the bricks and concrete of districts without history or meaning into gold'.¹¹ All these expectancies have generated an overload of meanings projected onto the institution, and architecture has become the vehicle for communicating all these connotations. Often, the symbolic significances that a museum needs to represent have resulted in buildings with hypertrophic visual semantics and a preference for formal or structural acrobatics. As museum designer Ronnie Self puts it, when 'architecture becomes an attraction, museums may become a pilgrim site'.¹²

Museums usually emerge, in terms of scale and architectural connotations, from the rest of the urban fabric. In eighteenth century Europe, existing palaces were re-adapted into museums, but later in the nineteenth century, there arose a need for more specialised structures. Architects responded by reworking classic typologies into new, albeit derivative, types. Being created under nationalist programmes, aiming to support or legitimise the government in power, museums mostly adopted variants of classic architectural language which was a common expression for all institutional buildings. This approach remained dominant until early twentieth century when designers and patrons opted for a shift, and modern museums became detached from the evolution of earlier types. Freed from typological references and contextual relations, the design of museums became opportunities for formal experiments.¹³ This trend has gathered strength until the present day, boosted by the incremental investments in cultural facilities.

In *Museum Architecture*, Susan MacLeod reflected on how this growing interest has generated some of the most admired buildings globally, albeit with some harsh criticism. She writes, 'The museum sector has been criticised from within for jumping on the architectural bandwagon without a careful reflection on the long-term impacts of the decision to build'.¹⁴

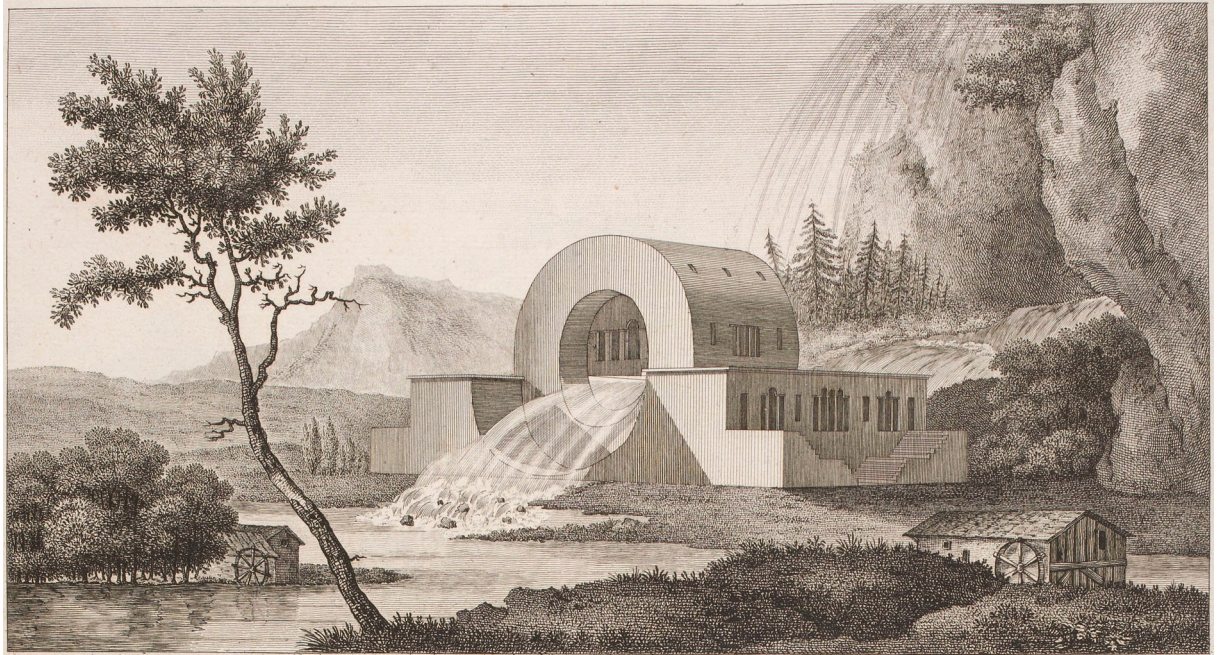
The Gulf has not been immune to this drift, though with a few significant specificities. Architect Jacques Herzog has co-authored a large number of museum projects in non-Western contexts, including Doha's unbuilt Museum of Orientalist Art (2010). In a recent interview reflecting on the general challenges of architects' global practices, Herzog poses the questions: 'What kind of a museum do you build for a place that has never had one? [...] What do you build for a young institution that still does not have an important collection?'¹⁵

While most of the Gulf countries have had museums, formal or informal, since the mid-twentieth century, it is true that many recent projects in the region started with a *theme* more than an established collection, or with a curatorial programme that was still in progress. As presented later in this text, less conventional, symbolic shapes allowed architecture to become the *storyteller*, leaving the content of the museum as secondary in terms of significance.

Manifesting the symbol

Architects resort to visual metaphors in order to make their creations more comprehensible to their clients, as well as a broader public.¹⁶ Today more than ever, a symbolic shape meets the urge of immediate communication of the global village better than an articulated reflection on context, historical precedents or typology, not to mention the temptation of possible instant fame on social media. Tom Dyckhoff, in his book *The Age of Spectacle*, reflects on the correlation between internet and the rise of iconic buildings, and how both have fed off each other in the past twenty years: 'A media industry and an audience ever hungrier for imagery ever more incredible; a building industry that can create that imagery ever faster and in more flamboyant, spectacular form; and a means of communicating both globally and instantly. A perfect storm.'¹⁷ Icons also seem to perform better in international competitions through which big commissions are often assigned. There are certain unwritten rules to produce an icon: an unusual and symbolic shape different from any other competitors, as well as a technical challenge, where complexity reinforces the 'wow-factor'. Size is another crucial aspect since the icon has to stand out in the city fabric. Furthermore, the name and the fame of the designer play a major role in establishing the reputation—or the brand—of an iconic building.¹⁸

'Iconicity' does not only lend a branded image to the building and its authors but also, to the place where it sits, helping to create a 'brandscape'. On the latter, Dyckhoff argues that 'Cities, after all, are now brands.' In a global entrepreneurial city, the space is sold by the square metre and 'the idea of promoting



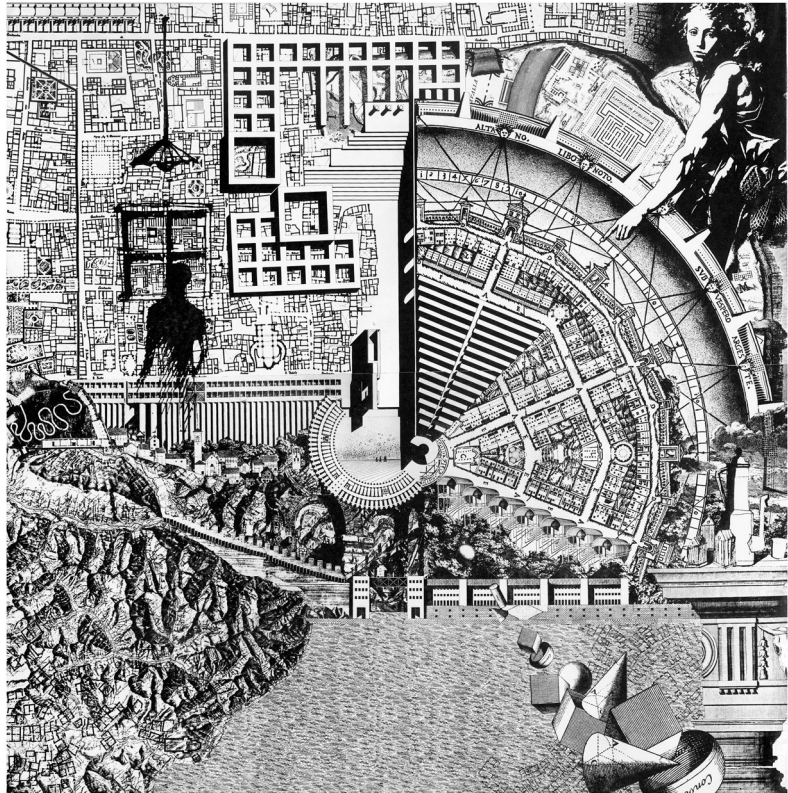
a place as if it were a product [...] has become utterly normal. Places are business; they have public images.¹⁹

According to architectural critic Charles Jencks, the creation of an iconic building takes a subtle compromise, achieved by negotiating the difficult terrain between explicit signs and implicit meanings.²⁰ When the explicit sign takes over, detaching or hiding the inner logic of space from the exterior appearance, the building becomes the symbol, a 'building-becoming-sculpture' as per Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour's famous comparison 'the duck and the decorated shed'.²¹ This quote referenced the Long Island Duckling restaurant as presented in Peter Blakes' *God's Own Junkyard* (1972), where the eatery is shaped in the form of a duck as a clear and direct hint to the primary function of the building.

Italian architect and theorist Franco Purini defines this as a 'verbal and direct metaphor' which can be linked to a long list of illustrious precedents, dating back to Ledoux's House of Water Surveyors in Chaux (1804).²² In this ideal project, the owner's job title was symbolised by the barrel-shaped construction that theatrically embraced the water spring of the river Loue (Fig. 3). Conversely, Purini identifies the second type of architectural metaphor as 'verbal and indirect'.²³ In this case, symbols are not manifested directly by forms, but are interwoven together with the figurative meaning of the building's elements; for example, 'the column and the pillar, while supporting the building physically, are also symbolising the institutions that sustain the society'.²⁴

Figure 3.
Maison des Directeurs de la Loue
(the House of Water Surveyors) by
Claude Nicolas Ledoux, in *L'
Architecture considérée sous le
rapport de l'art, des moeurs et de la
législation*, Tome 1 (Paris: De
l'imprimerie de H. L. Perronneau,
1804), Pl. 6, reproduced with
permission from the Bibliothèque
Nationale de France
<gallica.bnf.fr>

Figure 4.
La città analoga (the Analogous City), 1976, Aldo Rossi, Eraldo Consolascio, Bruno Reichlin, and Fabio Reinhart, courtesy of Fondazione Aldo Rossi



Close to Purini's indirect metaphor stands Aldo Rossi's use of analogy, which also implies a relationship between architecture and memory through the representation of the role of history. The analogy, which translates from Latin as 'proportion' or 'equivalence', is a design tool used to create a correspondence between the elements of a composition and to organise the syntax of buildings within the city, as is the case in Rossi's conceptual *Città Analoga* (1976). Rossi's analogue process presents history as a typological precedent in order to produce architecture as a result of collective memories and civic values fostering a stronger sense of place (Fig. 4).²⁵

The contextual linkage

Evocative language often plays a role in the definition of museums. Borrowing terms from the ancient institutions, the museum is frequently referred to as a 'temple', a 'secular cathedral', a 'new agora', or a 'public forum'.²⁶ It is also portrayed as a 'theatre of conscience'.²⁷ George Bataille's renowned and rather sceptical metaphor suggests that the museum is 'a colossal mirror in which a man [*sic*] contemplates himself, finding himself literally admirable'.²⁸ Several years later, Alexandre Kazerouni 'tropicalised' Bataille's image for the

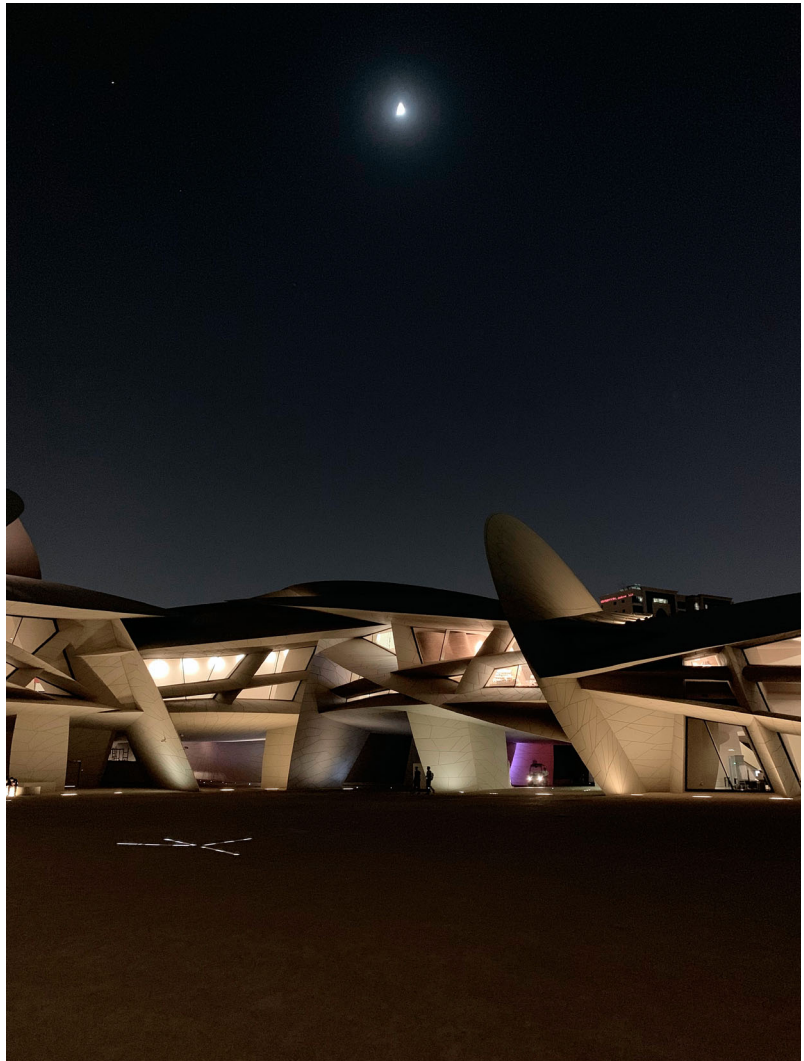
Arabian context, suggesting that the mirror is engineered to reflect, or project, the sheikh more than the visitor, implying the strategic importance given by the Gulf's rulers to culture and soft power.²⁹ Similarly, though encompassing the broader horizon of the whole Arab world, Suhail Bisharat reflects on museums as 'trophies of stability' and 'showcases of unity'.³⁰ Conversely, Sarina Wakefield highlights how Gulf museums perpetuate a long Western legacy in being 'agents of identity-making'. In particular, they aim to single out and promote national uniqueness among the other GCC countries, which are often perceived as all too similar from the outside.³¹ The need for individuality is particularly evident in the narrative behind the new national museums, intended to display and clarify local roots, traditions, and history. Building on Jill Crystal's works (1990), Miriam Cook describes the complications and conflicts in building the appropriate content for a museum in the Gulf, which, on many occasions, deals with tribal history, legitimisation of the ruling elites, and sometimes even the validation of re-written traditions.³² This means, at times, the exclusion of less patriotic episodes of the past, such as the British-protectorate years, with the clear intent of minimising its historical role. These countries' challenges in defining politically adequate content also contributes to the fact that the Gulf is usually richer in oral traditions and intangible heritage than material culture.

Hence, minimising the content implies that the container has to be maximised, resulting in a significant portion of the museum's communicative load relying on the building itself. The patrons that promote museum constructions in the region usually demand an architecture that transmits expressions of locality and authenticity, combined with the country's progressive spirit. As a general perception in the region, authenticity means being freed from Western influences, resulting in a visual language that enhances the symbols of a romanticised pre-oil life. At the same time, the country's progressive vision has to be manifested through modern technology, even if it is mostly imported from the West. Borrowing from Cook's argument, it can be argued that architecture has to combine the 'symbolic tribal and the material modern'.³³ This difficult and sometimes rhetorical mixture is created through the use of visual metaphors that reinterpret symbols of the past through a hi-tech lens at the architectural scale. This approach defines the contextual linkage: a general perception of appropriateness of the design proposal to the local environment. In places like the Gulf, architecture is often imported, in terms of expertise, languages, materials, and technology. The site is often an abstract plot in a repetitive urban canvas, without morphological specificities. On many occasions, the physical context is not sufficiently characterised to define a project theme, which meant that the symbolic link to the cultural context needs to be expressed architecturally.

The building as a storyteller

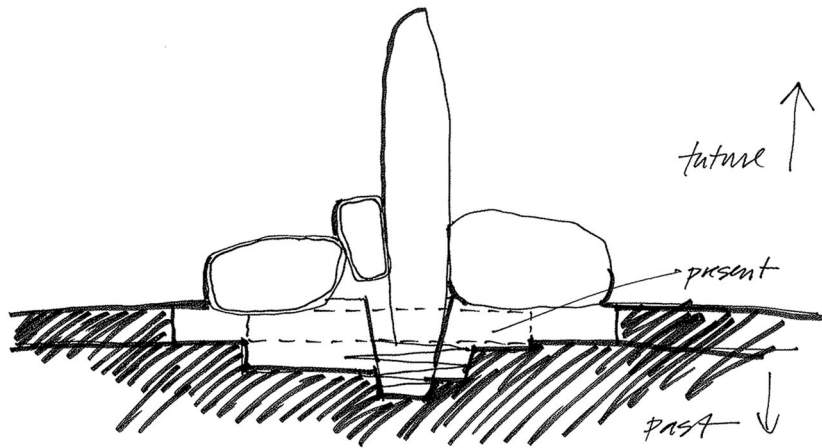
The narratives generated by the architectural projects recently developed in the Arabian Peninsula are noteworthy examples of the role of museum building as

Figure 5.
Qatar National Museum, Doha,
Qatar, 2019, by Ateliers Jean
Nouvel, photographed by and
courtesy of Jumanah Abbas, 2019



storytelling, often enhanced to compensate for an initial lack of a curatorial theme for the project.³⁴ In the present study that analyses storytelling museum buildings by renowned architects, the relations between forms, symbols, and associated narratives are revealed to underline the use of metaphorical language that builds a connection with the local context.

The initial group of buildings to be examined revolves around the representation of a local and traditional environment, mostly the desert, to create a contextual linkage and evoke the genuineness of pre-oil life. First in this sequence is the last museum project completed in the region (March 2019), the National Museum of Qatar in Doha (NMQ), for being the most overt exemplification of a verbal and direct metaphor (Fig. 5). 'The National Museum is dedicated



to the history of Qatar,' says NMQ designer Jean Nouvel, as 'symbolically, its architecture evokes the desert, its silent and eternal dimension, but also the spirit of modernity and daring that have come along and shaken up what seemed unshakeable'.³⁵ The building's notorious shape is a gargantuan representation of the desert rose stone: a cluster of crystallised disks made of sand, baryte, and gypsum that occurs in arid landscapes. According to Nicolai Ouroussoff, Nouvel's initial proposal was a hypogeal structure, but the project was not dubbed sufficiently representative of the country's ambitions, and the architect was invited to submit a more evocative shape.³⁶ The rose, while not regarded as a local emblem before the construction, brought the desert into contention to support the museum's need for local character.³⁷

Not very far from Doha in the coastal town of Dammam, the Norwegian architecture firm Snøhetta completed the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (KACWC) in 2018, as part of the headquarters of the Saudi oil company Aramco (Fig. 6). Tagged as 'the pebbles', the museum is a composition of stone-like elements in mutual balance, rising from a flat and arid environment. The architects define their approach as 'contextual conceptualism' that generates a 'series of contextual examinations rather than isolated masterpieces'.³⁸ In the case of Dammam, the context examined is—again—the desert, and the building shape alludes to the lithological formations that originated oil, the country's primary source of wealth and Aramco's focal product. As Aramco notes, 'The design focuses on the geological nature of the Kingdom, using an assortment of different-sized "rocks", which symbolise diversity'.³⁹ The symbol has a different level of abstraction compared to the NMQ, but the system of reference used is quite similar. Interestingly, Omrania Associates and Henning Larsen Architects' entry for the same KACWC competition proposed an alternative shape which relied on a similar metaphorical image: a ribbon culminating in an upright circle 'inspired by the

Figure 6.
King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra), Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, 2018, by Snøhetta, (left) a sketch of cross section, drawn by and courtesy of Snøhetta; (right) façade detail, photographed by and courtesy of Frans Parthesius, 2018

dynamic, undulating sand dunes of the Arabian landscape and its geology'.⁴⁰ The desert dunes are also a direct reference for the UAE Pavilion at the Shanghai Expo 2010, created by Foster + Partners and later rebuilt in Abu Dhabi. The architecture 'naturally drew inspiration from the vast rolling sand dunes that are a common feature of all seven emirates', embodying the spirit of the Union (Fig. 7).⁴¹

Another example of a similar reference to the traditional Arabian landscape is the Museum of the Built Environment of Riyadh, designed in 2013 by the USA-based firm FXFowle, recently renamed FXCollaborative, as part of the King Abdullah Financial District. The building has a wedge-shaped volume, parted into different shards. The concept revolves around the idea of the sunken *wadi*, 'a dry desert riverbed that becomes wet during heavy rains [that] runs through the development, bisecting the museum's site, a large plaza'.⁴² In the District, the wadi has been translated into a linear pedestrian park connecting the key buildings and echoing geological processes such as erosion, in the fragmented volumes of the museum and the surrounding artificial topology.

The second group of case studies translates Islamic architectural elements or archaeological findings into volumes, surfaces, and structures, with the intention of finding appropriateness with local sites and the cultural context. It is a well-known case in Qatar's Museum of Islamic Arts (MIA), one of the early examples of the GCC's new wave of museums. Inaugurated in 2008, MIA is one of the last works of the Chinese-American architect I.M. Pei. All sources agree on a direct allusion to the ninth-century fountain of Ibn Tulun Mosque in Cairo.⁴³ However, Pei seems to open the discussion on a more general design theme: 'I think that geometry is the fundamental element of architecture. It doesn't matter if it's Islamic or Renaissance.'⁴⁴ Apart from the allusion to Ibn Tulun Mosque for the overall volume of the building, Pei seems to be making a direct reference to *muqarnas* in the composition of the internal

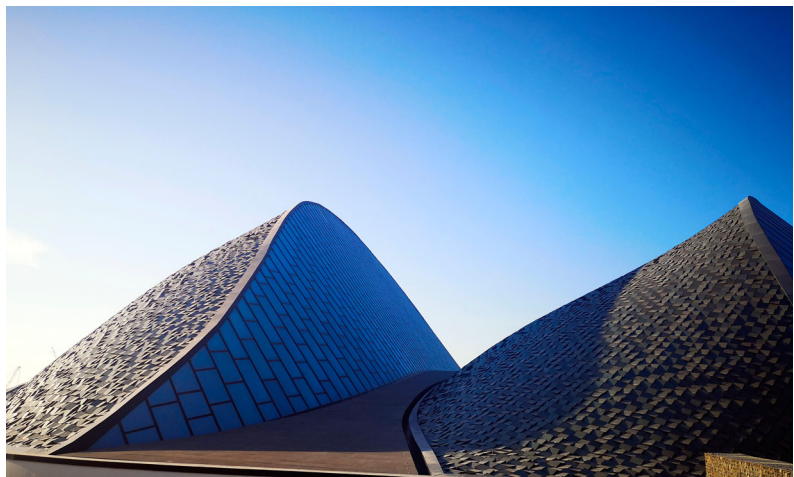


Figure 7.
Roof detail, UAE Pavilion at
Shanghai Expo 2010 by Foster +
Partners, rebuilt at Saadiyat Island,
Abu Dhabi, UAE, currently used as
a music school, photographed by
the author, 2021

volume, the atrium, and the central dome. This architectural element is based on complex geometrical studies dating back to the golden age of Arab sciences, and is a traditional Islamic architectural feature, but it is not typical of Qatar. These transnational references build an architecture that aims to transcend Qatar's borders and alludes to a pan-Islamic heritage (Fig. 8).

In a similar manner, Charles Correa's entry for the 2007 MIA design competition is hinged on elements derived from the Indian-Islamic architectural tradition: 'The wall, climaxing in a recall of the original astronomical instruments developed by Ulugh Bey in Central Asia, pays tribute to the

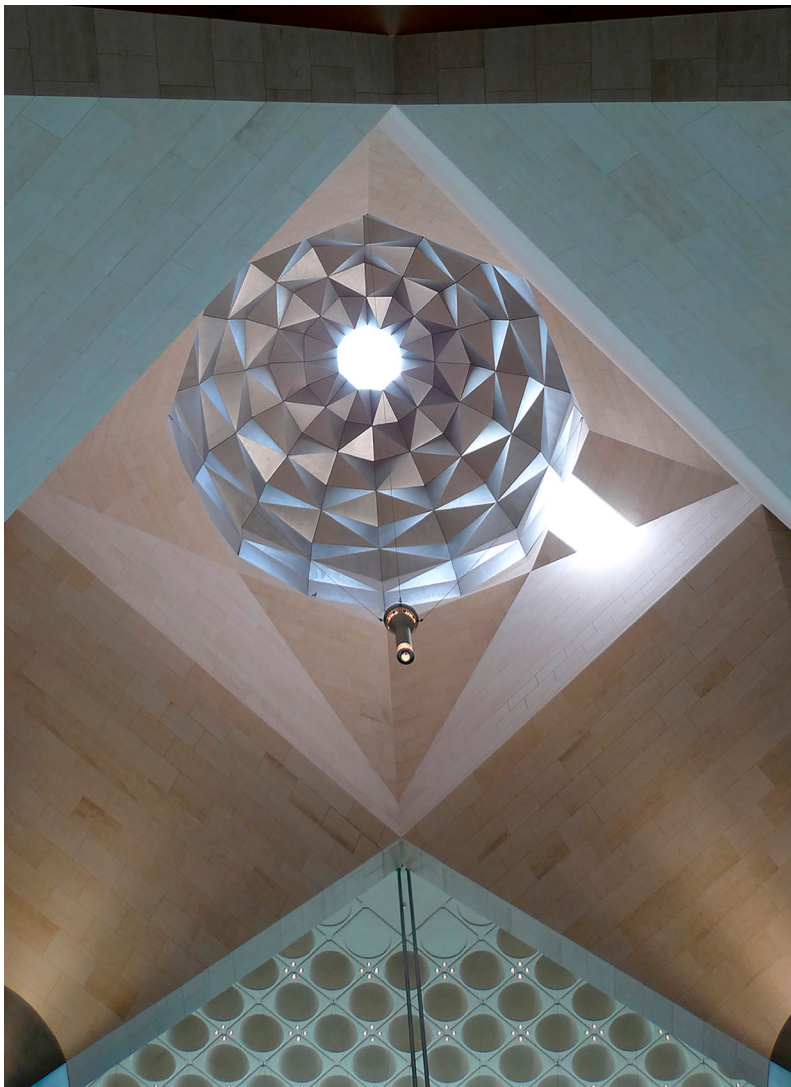


Figure 8.
Interior view of the dome, Museum
of Islamic Art, Doha, Qatar, 2008,
by I. M. Pei, photographed by the
author, 2014

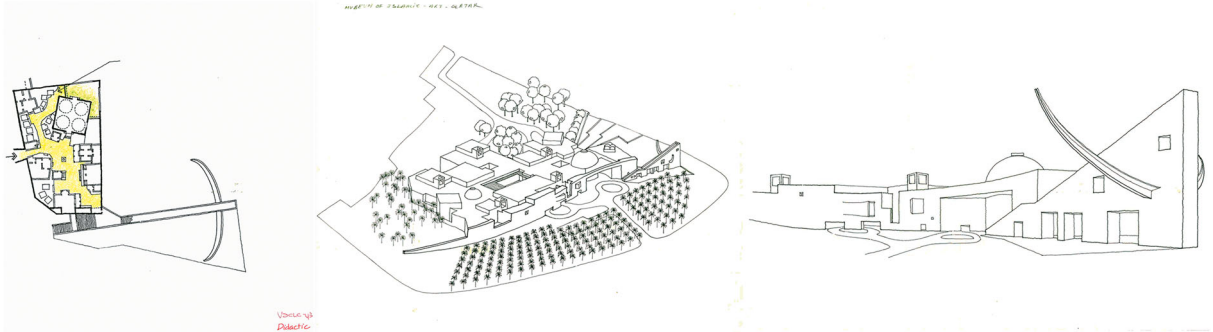


Figure 9.
Competition entry for the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, Qatar, 1997, by Charles Correa Associates, courtesy of Charles Correa Foundation

achievements of Islam in science and astronomy' (Fig. 9).⁴⁵ Similarly, the entry developed by Rasen Badran has a clear allusion to the vernacular and regional architectural features such as the windcatchers.⁴⁶

More recently, the new Dubai Archaeology Museum, an unbuilt project by Canadian firm Moriyama & Teshima Architects (MTA), also relies on two direct formal references to ancient artefacts. The project was developed as a competition entry and 'its cylindrical form recalls the historic watchtowers of Dubai', the architects explain, 'and the enigmatic structures of the Umm al-Nar culture'.⁴⁷ The reference is to a series of circular structures of stone-blocks unearthed in the UAE and Oman that date back to the Bronze Age. Moreover, according to MTA, the museum's façade, a multifaceted metal mesh that wraps the cylindrical shape of the galleries, alludes to the Mystery Anklet, an archaeological finding from the site of Saruq Al-Hadid, deep within Dubai's desert.

MTA used a similar design approach in a separate museum, recently inaugurated in Dubai. The Etihad Museum was completed in 2016, as a new structure to complement the Union House: the location where the seven emirs ratified to the agreement that created the United Arab Emirates in 1971.⁴⁸ The museum is meant to commemorate the foundational moment of the country. Based on this narrative, the building assumes the role of representing an intangible content with its shape: '[an] undulating parabolic curve representing the parchment upon which the unification agreement was written and its tapering golden columns representing the pens with which the document was signed' (Fig. 10).⁴⁹

The third group of museum projects refers to pre-oil life as a manner of asserting authenticity. The *Khaleeji* tradition merges the desert and the sea, and these two aspects are symbolised with elements such as tents and sails. The Kuwait Pavilion at the 2015 World Expo in Milan by Studio Italo Rota was a combination of triangular sails evoking sea life and pre-oil tradition to create a multifaceted screen for video projections.⁵⁰ The *dhow*, the typical sailboat of the Gulf maritime tradition, was also the main allusion for UN Studio's 2008 proposal for the Museum of the Middle East Modern Art, in Khor Dubai.



The elongated and fluid shape resembled the keel of a boat 'with its Dhow-like prow rising up, the building offers panoramic views to the surroundings, and vice versa' (Fig. 11).⁵¹

Moreover, the combination of tents and sails was the image behind Christian de Potzamparc's less-known proposal for Sheikh Zayed National Museum in Abu Dhabi: 'The inspiration behind the immense concave veils [...] was the sheets of a tent, the sails of a Dhow as a way to represent the intemporal [sic.] Bedouin existence in these eternal lands', the architect explains, 'where the stars silhouette the immensity of a silent sea of dunes. This project is not a simple building, it represents the breadth of a nation exemplified by Sheikh Zayed'.⁵²

Shaikh Zayed, one of the founding fathers of the UAE federation, used 'falconry expeditions to forge connections between tribes and to create a distinct national identity which ultimately led to the founding of the United Arab Emirates', as noted by the Minister of State of the UAE, Sultan Ahmed Al-Jaber. He added, 'now, the falcon design will symbolise how we are connecting the UAE

Figure 10.
Southwest elevation, Etihad
Museum, Dubai, UAE, 2017, by
Moriyama and Teshima Architects,
photographed by the author, 2019



Figure 11.
Side elevation and entrance detail,
Museum of Middle East Modern
Art, Khor Dubai, UAE, 2008,
designed by and courtesy of UN
Studio

to the minds of the world'.⁵³ Accordingly, Santiago Calatrava's concept for the UAE Pavilion at Expo 2020 is a falcon-winged rotating roof that reinstates falconry as one of the most evocative, pre-oil, and tribal symbols of the region.

To Saadiyat, again

Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island was, once conceived, one of the most architecturally rich museum districts in the world. The project was meant to combine high-end residential areas with universities and cultural facilities, including a number of art pavilions and five world-class museums: Sheikh Zayed Museum by Norman Foster, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi by Frank Gehry, the Performing Arts Centre by Zaha Hadid, the Louvre Abu Dhabi by Jean Nouvel and the Maritime Museums by Tadao Ando.⁵⁴

From the beginning, the masterplan was presented in figurative terms, whereby the five museums would be located to resemble 'a string of pearls on the coastline'.⁵⁵ In today's Gulf, pearl diving is an unequivocal reference to traditional life, as it was a common occupation for *Khaleeji* men before the market declined in the 1920s, after Japan invented pearl cultivation. Out of these five pearls, at the time of writing, one—the Louvre—has been completed; the Guggenheim and the Zayed are under construction; while, due to budget restrictions, the Maritime and the Performing Arts Centre have effectively been cancelled. The latter, which was shaped to resemble an encrusted oyster, protruding from the land into the sea with the sinuous and fluid forms characteristic of Hadid's latest works, also revolved around a similar symbolic imagery. Metaphorically, the performance space was embedded, yet exposed at the same time, emerging out of the structure, like the fruits of a plant, facing toward the sea.⁵⁶ References to tribal life are also the origin of Foster's proposal for Zayed National Museum, where the 'distinctive towers



are reminiscent of the wingtips of the falcon—a powerful symbol of the UAE’s rich cultural heritage’ (Fig. 12).⁵⁷

Similarly, according to the client, the Guggenheim’s towers are shaped to ‘recall the region’s ancient wind-towers, which both ventilate and shade the exterior courtyards in a fitting blend of Arabian tradition and modern design’.⁵⁸ While it seems very difficult to distinguish a reference to the *barjeels* in Gehry’s syncopated volumes, the description is indicative of the apparent necessity for all the projects located on Saadiyat to appear coherent with the context in order to justify their presence on the island.

The Louvre Abu Dhabi (LAD) merits a more in-depth investigation since the contextual linkage and the sense of place are subtler than in the previous cases. The project surges from an unprecedented partnership between the Abu Dhabi government and the French state, involving the lending of art pieces from a dozen different French and international museums, in coordination with the Louvre. As opposed to most of the previous examples, the Louvre developed the content while the container’s concept was still in the

Figure 12.
Construction site of Zayed National
Museum, Saadiyat Island, Abu
Dhabi, UAE, photographed by the
author, 2022

making. As a result, the art pieces are displayed thematically in order to explore the connections between distant cultures, rather than chronologically or by geographical compartments. It is part of an ambitious curatorial plan to create the museum of world civilisations, in an attempt to supersede the notion of local versus global, and to distance itself as much as possible from polemics of cultural sell-out, cultural neo-colonialism, or (self) orientalism within the collection.⁵⁹ It can be read as the last step in a process initiated some decades ago by the French government as a means of coming to terms with the colonial past through museums and soft power. It started with the Institute du Monde Arabe (IMA), also designed by Jean Nouvel and Architecture-Studio (1980), and has more recently continued with Musée de l'homme/Quay Branly, again have been developed by Jean Nouvel (2006), the renovated Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration (2007), and the new Islamic art wing at the Louvre (by Mario Bellini and Rudy Ricciotti, 2012), partially financed with GCC money (Fig. 13).

The architectural discourse surrounding LAD concentrates primarily on the building's main feature: a 180 m wide metal dome suspended over the museum rooms. It is composed of several membranes of geometrical patterns as well as perforated meshes that modulate light into the interior. It is the result

Figure 13.
Department of Islamic Arts of
Louvre, Paris, 2012, by Mario Bellini
Architects and Agence Rudy
Ricciotti, photographed by and
courtesy of Philippe Ruault



of an experimental work on architectural skins that started with IMA's south façade and was perfected in buildings such as in the Doha Tower, built in Qatar in 2010. The result is a poetic 'rain of light' that floods the inner space, reminiscent of traditional *mashrabiyas* (lattice works) (Fig. 14).

If we could overlook the dome for a moment and remove the lid, we would discover below it a sequence of relational spaces typical of a traditional Arab village. The alternation of positive and negative spaces, open-air passages and enclosed rooms, the proximity and the transition from public, semi-public, to private spaces, correspond strongly with the pre-oil Islamic city (Fig. 15).

Hala Wardé, a partner at Ateliers Jean Nouvel (AJN) and the project manager for LAD, describes the derivative process that leads to the design of a new *medina*: 'we reach different urban plans, whether from traditional Arab cities or modern plans from European and American towns, or even imaginary plans from Piranesi, for example'.⁶⁰ By overlapping these different references,

Figure 14.
Spatial relations between open and enclosed spaces, Louvre Abu Dhabi, UAE, 2017, by Atelier Jean Nouvel, photographed by the author, 2019

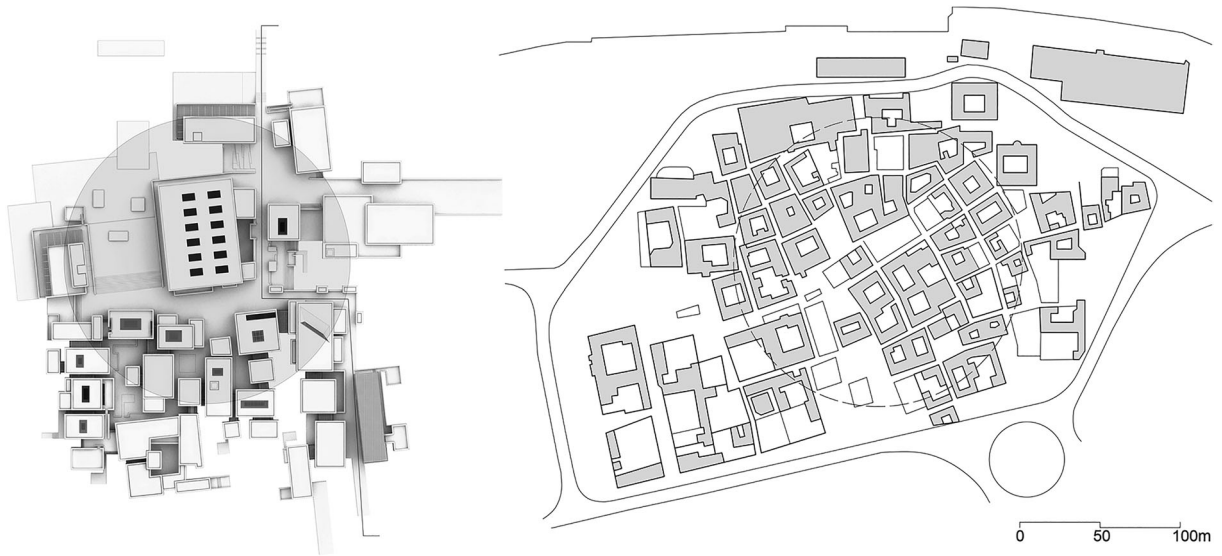




Figure 15.
Louvre Abu Dhabi, UAE, 2017, by
Ateliers Jean Nouvel, (left) roof plan
with the dome; (right) roof plan
without the dome, courtesy of TDIC
- Architecte Jean Nouvel

the AJN team created a different typological mat as if 'a pre-existing, multi-layered archaeology could have always been there and has risen to the surface from the sand and seabed'.⁶¹ In this case, and for once, the need for cultural specificity is not resolved metaphorically, as it is, in fact, an analogy, similar to the one previously presented in Aldo Rossi's *Città Analoga*. The LAD goes beyond cultural specificity in a sophisticated way, recreating an architecture that feels appropriate by constructing an analogy with the urban fabric of cities of the past and the present, and therefore, a place to which visitors can subconsciously relate to (Fig. 16).

Despite the fact that the building can be deemed an appropriate answer to the cultural context, it may not be so in relation to its physical context. A common criticism of LAD is that it is an island isolated on a semi-deserted island. Yasser Elsheshtawy pointed out that its remoteness from the city, lack of public space, and difficult accessibility conflict with a cultural institution aiming to be inclusive and a bridge between different cultures.⁶² While this criticism is legitimate, the location of the museum in relation to the city has to be read within the regional urban growth system, a sort of 'leap-frog' development driven by real-estate and forces of speculation. These aspects can hardly be mitigated at the architectural scale nor during the museum design process. It also has to be considered that Saadiyat island's urbanisation is far from complete and the plan, so far, has been changed several times. The proximity and the relationship between the museum and the new residential parts of the city, the connection with walkways, sea fronts and public spaces, and finally, the role that the institution will play in Abu Dhabi in the long term, remain to be seen.



Architecture as a site or as an object?

In recent decades, the museum has been a typology in constant evolution, mirroring social and political changes, and transforming from a repository of traces of the past into an instrument of interpretation of the present, becoming a billboard to showcase the progress and prosperity of global cities. In particular, the younger countries considered in this study have demonstrated, following the long Western cultural practice, how to conceive the museum as part of a bigger plan: to create or cement common values within the nation-building process. The shift in the primary purpose of the institution has led to the evolution of its architectural form, parting from the rest of the city's building stock to the point that prosaic projects have almost become an exception. While this is a global trend, the Gulf is an interesting case study for the proliferation of symbolic museum shapes, as shown above, to contribute to the emergent values of these young nations.

These case studies in the Gulf become part of the wider global drive towards the city's 'brandscape', which resorts to metaphoric shapes in the urban spaces, supported by digital media in establishing the brand of a place. The expression, coined by Anna Klingmann, reveals the intersection between urban development and place marketing, and the practice of favouring photogenic signature buildings over more complex intervention that work in conjunction with the pre-existing urban and social fabric.⁶³

In many global cities, the tendency is that the iconic buildings manifest references to a variety of symbols or objects from different imagery not necessarily connected with the notion of locality or tradition: for example, in London, the 'Gherkin', the 'Shard', the 'Walkie-Talkie', etc. On the contrary, what seems recurrent and specific in the Gulf region is the urge for museum architectures

Figure 16. Urban fabric comparison, (left) volumetric plan of Louvre Abu Dhabi, UAE, 2017, by Atelier Jean Nouvel; (right) heritage district of Bastakiya in Dubai, diagrams by the author, 2021

to assume evocative shapes that can visually express a connection with the local culture and the traditional environment: to express a linkage with the context. One of the reasons is that the Arab Peninsula is an evolving context, constantly adjusting on the tradition/modernity axis. The rapid and impatient growth often clash with the people's need to come to terms with the many economic and social changes which have occurred in recent decades. The urban environments of the Gulf cities have as a result quickly westernised, often at the expense of ignoring or even removing the traditional urban fabric. The new developments, hinged more on speculative models than typological continuities in the local environment, can hardly generate a sense of belonging for the native population. Finally, the continued exposure to global culture and the presence of a large population of expatriates in these nations has blurred the contour of what can be perceived as indigenous, authentic, or locally appropriate. Within this context, hi-tech evocative architectural shapes with allusions to traditional symbols may appear reductive, but deemed to better embody the Gulf's aspiration for locality and a regained sense of place.

Accordingly, the present study expands on the competing ideas of *architecture as a site* versus *architecture as an object*. For many, it is probably easier to sympathise with the idea of a site-specific architecture, especially when there is a non-western and de-colonial agenda at stake in the design of a cultural institution. Nevertheless, this study keeps the discussion open on the reasons behind the persistent selection of iconic shapes in the conception of these structures. The ability of reconciling the two approaches is supposedly contained in the architect's pencil. The general public frequently perceive the museum as an aesthetically driven building created by the autonomous gesture of an ambitious designer. This view has to be conciliated with a deeper understanding of the actors involved and their respective responsibilities.⁶⁴ While the decision process in any construction practice involves a series of professionals from different disciplines and with different priorities, in the case of the Gulf, the client plays a particularly important role.

The case studies analysed above, the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the National Museum of Qatar, exemplify this last point. The two projects were drafted at the same time by AJN; however, the design approach and the results could not have turned out more differently. Resuming Venturi's terminology, it is like embracing the 'duck' and the 'decorated shell' at the same time. Even the consideration that contemporary international firms such as AJN assign different teams to different projects is not enough to explain such a pronounced dissonance in the design philosophy of the two buildings. Perhaps the answer is not to be found on the drafting tables of the architect's office, but in the counterpart's request: the client's vision on the matter. In Qatar, AJN's first project was rejected.⁶⁵ The museum was a subterranean structure, which meant to respect and emphasise the old Amiri Palace, a pre-existent heritage building at the centre of the same plot.⁶⁶ Later, a second attempt secured the commission with an appealing and direct verbal metaphor: the desert rose. In the UAE, the Abu Dhabi government had a different approach and, also, it was not the only interlocutor; the Louvre and the French Ministry of Culture

had a stake in the discussion. Wardé recalls that Abu Dhabi's government requested a landmark and a tourist destination, not necessarily 'an expression of certain Islamic identity'.⁶⁷ This is likely the reason why AJN was able to venture into a more sophisticated definition of place-identity beyond the architectural form.

The Louvre Abu Dhabi seem to indicate the possibility of a more layered approach to the apparent design impasse of the Gulf by implementing a system of analogies that is more than a direct metaphorical icon or a disinterested arrangement of functional needs. Since the cultural race taking place in the Gulf has not yet been completed and new projects are currently in the pipelines (for instance, the newly announced Saudi Museum of Modern Art), it will be interesting to monitor if the trend of direct metaphors will continue or if projects like the Louvre will lead to a subtler relationship with the context.

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