

Investments in Cultural Infrastructure in the Gulf Countries

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Like everything else in the world that was affected by the coronavirus pandemic, the arts and culture sectors of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries screeched to a crashing halt for most of the past year. Gulf cities, Dubai and Doha in particular have been home to branches of the world's most iconic brand names in the international culture scene – the Louvre, Guggenheim, Christie's, and Sotheby's, to name a few – whose names remained emblazoned on the building façades, while their interiors lay empty, hollow, devoid of people and profit. Similarly, the Gulf's many other public cultural offerings – art fairs, film festivals, and museum and gallery exhibitions – were postponed or cancelled, effectively stalling Gulf governments' long-term plans to create country-specific art and culture "sectors," as part of their "2030 Vision" for non-hydrocarbon-based economic futures.

The arts and culture sectors of the Arabian peninsula have been instrumentalized by Gulf governments as they seek to harmonize each pillar of the nation in the service of diversifying GCC state economies away from hydrocarbons towards tourism and a more knowledge-based future. Because the Gulf's art and culture sectors are almost entirely state-sponsored projects, and because they are intimately intertwined with these states' nation-building efforts, the domino effect of one part of the economy over the other was palpable. Over the past year, GCC museums and galleries, like so many of the world's cultural institutions, have had to innovate and come up with creative ways of remaining relevant during the pandemic period, which can only too easily intro-

duce institutional, existential crises. Much of these innovations in the arts and culture sector were related to new ways of conducting operations online, with museums reaching new audiences and galleries presenting some semblance of their former selves in digital space.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, events on the Gulf's cultural calendars were positioned as key attractions for tourists and visitors from all over the world, many of whom go on holiday in the Gulf specifically, while others take advantage of Gulf airline stopover deals to spend a few days in the region on their way to and from destinations further afield. Cultural tourism was building a head of steam and working towards seriously diversifying Gulf state national economies, as enshrined in each country's national visions.

The arts in the Gulf have always been carefully curated by the state. Since their independence from British protectionism in the 1960s-1970s, the Gulf states have worked towards shaping their tangible and intangible infrastructure over the past 40-50 years, from physical landscapes and the nationwide urban planning of buildings, roads, and metro systems, to full-scale cultural landscapes, educational and cultural institutions, museums and galleries. The Gulf states' cultural scene today seeks to rival that of the most prestigious international ones in terms of scale, industry and artist attraction, and ultimately market establishment and profits.

Despite the physical inactivity and the seemingly drastic outlook for the future of the Gulf's art and culture landscape, there were several virtual initiatives that took place over the past year that introduced the Gulf to the future of cultural activities: both digital and virtual. The Qatar Children's Museum was launched virtually in 2020, and engaged with its target audiences through a variety of online

activities, and the 3-2-1 Qatar Sports and Olympic Museum will officially launch in 2021, and had already begun communicating with its target audiences far in advance of a physical launch.

Furthermore, partnering with online platforms such as Google Arts and Culture, many GCC museums and galleries are now providing virtual portals to the interiors of their buildings as well as to their collections, a vast array of which can now be accessed online. The Gulf's museum collections are now available for virtual public consumption all around the world, allowing Gulf states to share their cultural treasures with international virtual visitors and to have far-reaching influence beyond their borders – bearing in mind that such access is the privilege of the technologically and culturally connected.

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The Gulf states' cultural sectors do more than contribute to diversifying hydrocarbon-based economies, they are also the region's prime agents of nation branding and cultural diplomacy efforts, imbuing the Gulf states with significant influence and reorienting their image towards one that is more global and culturally connected. Every year, for instance, Qatar hosts an "international year of culture" honouring its diplomatic and cultural relationship with a different country. In 2020, Qatar honoured France with a programme that included a variety of exhibitions, festivals and events in both nations. As just one example of these bilateral cultural activities, we have France's contemporary art centre and Qatar's Mathaf: the Arab Museum of Modern Art cooperated to co-curate an exhibition of contemporary art at the Palais de Tokyo titled "Our world is Burning," featuring works by a variety of artists.

The past year introduced some serious cultural surprises in the Gulf states, one of which was the new and hitherto unlikely diplomatic and cultural relationship established between the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Israel, as part of the US-brokered Abraham Accords.¹ The diplomatic deal instantaneously normalized relations between the two Gulf countries and Israel, and paved the way for Morocco and Sudan to acquiesce in a similar manner. The accords were rapidly manifested in a variety of large-scale and unprecedented public events, including the first flight carrying Israeli tourists to the UAE; the first time Israeli artists were ever invited to hold an exhibition in the UAE; the inclusion of an Israeli pavilion at the now-postponed Dubai Expo 2020; the opening of a Holocaust memorial exhibition in Dubai; the establishment of a joint film festival that takes place alternately in Israel and the UAE; among a multitude of other culture-based activities.

Testament to the deeply political nature of national art sectors, all these cultural efforts were sponsored by their states. The Al Qattara Cinema event, for instance, was established through an agreement between the Abu Dhabi Film Commission and the Israel Film Fund (IFF), and was organized by the Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi (DCT Abu Dhabi), in collaboration with Image Nation and Jerusalem Sam Spiegel Film School (JSFS). Another surprise in the Gulf's art and culture sector came in the form of the government of Dubai's announcement regarding "the first cultural visa in the world,"² 1,000 of which will be granted to artists every year. Over the past year, the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority granted 69 "golden visas" to foreign artists and intellectuals, allowing them to have a ten-year residence in the UAE, in the hope of contributing to a more stable environment for artists to operate in. The Gulf states attract millions of migrant workers, with the UAE and Qatar home to the majority of these – anywhere between 80-90% of their populations are foreign residents. Long criticized for their lack of pathways to citizenship for many long-term residents, Qatar and the UAE have instituted extraordinary expansions in their visa regimes and a relaxing of stringent visa policies.

¹ GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES. "The Abraham Accords," 2020. www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords

² GOVERNMENT OF DUBAI. "Our Initiatives," 2021. <https://dubaiculture.gov.ae/en/Our-Initiative/Pages/The-first-cultural-visa-in-the-world.aspx>

In early 2021, a further diplomatic thaw was reached between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, on the one hand, and Qatar on the other, after a four-year-long air, sea and land blockade by the former three GCC countries over the latter, in what came to be known as the “GCC crisis” or the “blockade of Qatar.” This year will be the first time in a while that the cultural connections between the disputing countries will resume, and for each country to again begin accepting submissions from, and to participate in, each other’s festival and exhibition opportunities.

Yet another of the past year’s cultural novelties is Saudi Arabia’s inaugural Red Sea Film Festival. Postponed from March to November 2021, this will be the first large-scale event of its kind in a country that had previously outlawed cinema for over three decades.³ Along with all other aspects of the country, “as part of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s economic and social reform plan, Vision 2030, the kingdom has taken a top-down approach to developing the country’s arts and culture sector.”⁴ The kingdom’s public reimagination of itself is occurring through the physical and cultural infrastructure currently being built along its Red Sea coast. In parallel with the now-famous technology-based city, NEOM, Saudi’s dramatic cultural strides are the direct result of government mandate.

The governments of the Gulf’s young nations, all monarchical families, have demonstrated that creating a narrative is just as important as creating physical infrastructure in the interest of nation-building. These states have shaped images of themselves through their cultural landscapes, and have maintained strong relationships with respected international cultural institutions. Gulf governments are welding together physical infrastructure and narrative construction in all their star projects and partnerships with international entities. With funding drying up in other parts of the world, especially over the past year or so due to the pandemic, the Gulf states have thus far maintained a robust grant-giving policy, especially in relation to the film sector. Institutions such as the Doha Film Institute in Qatar, the Abu Dhabi Film

Commission in the UAE, and now the Red Sea Foundation in Saudi Arabia are shaping the future of the film industry, not only in their countries, but also across the region and internationally as well, challenging traditional cinema centres like Egypt and Lebanon. As the surrounding region is mired in geopolitical turbulence and as Middle Eastern countries continue to experience unrest and conflict, the Gulf states have remained “islands of efficiency,”⁵ attractive, stable and wealthy centres for the development of (state-led) art and culture in the region.

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³ WESTON, Mark. *Prophets and Princes: Saudi Arabia from Muhammad to the Present*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2008, p. 188.

⁴ CIOFFOLETTI, Michelle. “The Restructuring of Saudi Arts and Entertainment.” *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*. 8 August 2019. <https://agsiw.org/the-restructuring-of-saudi-arts-and-entertainment>

⁵ HERTOG, Steffen & LUCIANI, Giacomo. “Energy and Sustainability Policies in the GCC,” Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, *Research Paper*, no. 6, 2009. <https://dro.dur.ac.uk/7178/1/7178>