

Abu Dhabi and What it Means to be a Global Cultural Capital

Author(s): Cynthia P. Schneider

Source: *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Summer/Fall 2012, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Summer/Fall 2012), pp. 99-106

Published by: Georgetown University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43134240>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Georgetown University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*

JSTOR

Culture & Society

Abu Dhabi and What it Means to be a Global Cultural Capital

Cynthia P. Schneider

Today, cities and countries within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are engaged in a friendly cultural competition, which is reminiscent of the rivalry between Florence and Venice during the Italian Renaissance. The first in the GCC to emerge as a cultural capital was Dubai, a city renowned for its Film Festival and Art Fair. It has developed into a vibrant visual arts community with a presence in film and television production. Sharjah has specialized in theater and visual arts, earning a reputation for its Biennial. Doha and Abu Dhabi have sought to develop outstanding cultural centers and initiatives in multiple fields. All have opened institutions of higher education based on American models.

This article will analyze Abu Dhabi's growth as an international cultural center with a focus on the city's current priority of developing the human capital essential to support its ambitious cultural agenda. Questions to be considered include: 1) How does Abu Dhabi balance its twin goals of becoming a global cultural hub and fostering local cultural heritage? 2) What have been Abu Dhabi's success stories so far and what are likely to be its greatest challenges? 3) How does Abu Dhabi's cultural expansion compare with that of others in the Gulf? 4) How does it impact the broader

Cynthia P. Schneider is a former U.S. Ambassador to the Netherlands and a current Distinguished Professor in the Practice of Diplomacy at Georgetown University. She is also a co-director of the Muslims on Screen and Television (MOST) Resource and a senior non-resident fellow at the Brookings Institution.

Summer/Fall 2012 [99]

Middle East region?

With the 2004 announcement that introduced its ambitious plans to develop a regional cultural center on Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi took center stage in the burgeoning cultural scene in the Gulf. News of partnerships with the Louvre, the Guggenheim, and the British Museum, plus commissions to top architects such as Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid, increased the excitement around the most ambitious cultural project in recent memory.

Curiosity mixed with *schadenfreude* greeted the announcement during fall 2011 that the completion of the Lou-

Abu Dhabi's cultural projects.

The reorientation of priorities by the Abu Dhabi authorities seems to align with the thinking of Ghassan Salameh, chairman of the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, who recently observed that investing in people over the long term through serious education and cultural production reaps far more benefits than the "real estate view of things."² Abu Dhabi has not abandoned its building projects; as planning progressed for the museums, however, and as other cultural entities such as the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH) launched new ini-

An important part of this process involves the ongoing 'Emiratization,' or gradually weaning the cultural institutions and agencies from foreign managers and workforce and replacing them with Emiratis.

vre, Guggenheim, and Sheikh Zayed Museums would be delayed, owing to the "immense magnitude" of the work associated with such "consequential projects."¹ It seemed as if the Abu Dhabi authorities had decided to take a collective breath to re-assess their priorities and the overall organization of these massive projects—an entirely reasonable reaction in the face of the daunting task of designing, building, and curating three world-class museums in less than a decade. Outside factors probably also played a role. The combination of the Dubai bailout after the financial crash, and the increased expenditures on infrastructure for the poorer Emirates in the wake of the Arab Spring, diminished the funds immediately available for

initiatives, the need for a cultural infrastructure became even more apparent.

It comes as no surprise that a relatively new city like Abu Dhabi, whose urban life is only one generation old, had to make a concentrated effort to develop the climate, personnel, and audience to foster a welcoming environment and nurture these new institutions. An important part of this process involves an ongoing effort of 'Emiratization,' or gradually weaning the cultural institutions and agencies from foreign managers and workforce and replacing them with Emiratis. Successful 'Emiratization' requires trained, professional Emiratis to step in. A myriad of initiatives, such as the Emirates Foundation's curatorial training courses, initiated by Salwa Mikdadi,

director of the Arts and Culture Program at the Foundation, have been launched to prepare a local workforce of curators and museum professionals.³

Although architectural construction has slowed, 'building' of another kind is taking place in Abu Dhabi. Only time will reveal the success of the efforts to develop a local workforce and an audience both worthy and capable of sustaining the world-class institutions to be built on Saadiyat Island.

Cultural Heritage: the Past as the Gateway to the Future.

Abu Dhabi's emphasis on culture and education owes much to the open-minded and intellectually curious spirit of the United Arab Emirates's (UAE) founder Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahayan (1918-2004). Zayed, whose dedication to preserving architectural and living heritage has long been celebrated in the UAE, once said, "He who does not know his past, cannot make the best of his present and future, for it is from the past that we learn."⁴

For many Emiratis, the Sheikh Zayed Museum will represent the most important testament to their heritage and will also convey lessons for the future. Salama al-Shamsi, a young Emirati working on the museum, explained, "It is good for Emiratis, especially the youth, to understand that we are where we are because of him."⁵ Planned in consultation with the British Museum, the museum will explore the history of the region, organized around themes of importance to Sheikh Zayed: environment and conservation, faith, science and learning, unity, and heritage.

While the media has focused on the museums planned for Abu Dhabi's

future, researchers from ADACH, led by Deputy Director Dr. Sami el-Masri, have painstakingly reconstructed its past. About ninety miles inland from Abu Dhabi, al-Ain is home to the remnants of prehistoric structures as well as the restored nineteenth century al-Jahili Fort, where history and culture come to life in the form of concerts and performances. Kuwaiti director Sulayman al-Bassam's riveting "Richard III: An Arab Tragedy" was staged in al-Jahili's courtyard, featuring a murder on the parapets. UNESCO recently acknowledged the importance of the architectural history in and around Abu Dhabi, adding al-Ain to its "World Heritage List."

The most important architectural monument in Abu Dhabi is the Qasr al-Hosn fort (1760) that anchors the center of the city. When the plans to turn this fort into a multi-faceted cultural center—with spaces for performances and exhibitions, a national library, and a cultural business center—are accomplished, this monument, already familiar to Emiratis, will also become a destination for foreign visitors. Dr. Sami el-Masri describes Qasr al-Hosn as "a place that embodies Emirati identity and culture, a place to conserve and nurture traditions and to showcase new forms of creativity, a gateway for Abu Dhabi to discover the world and for the world to discover Emirati culture."⁶ The renovation will take four years, but already some parts of Qasr al-Hosn have hosted exhibitions. A recent retrospective of the leading contemporary Emirati artist Hassan Sharif was accompanied by the first complete monograph of his work.

In order to build the human capital

to preserve al-Ain and Qasr al-Hosn while opening these sites for tourism, ADACH has partnered with the University of Bauhaus and the UN's International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) to develop certificate courses in cultural heritage and preservation, including special tracks for craftspeople. These courses, open to all applicants including non-Emiratis, could provide a valuable service to the countries emerging from revolution such as Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. Libya, with its extraordinarily rich ancient heritage, urgently needs training in cultural preservation, as well as conservation equipment and facilities.

How generous the UAE will be with its wealth and educational resources to countries that are richer in cultural heritage but poorer in means to preserve their history remains an open question. The argument could be made, however, that the path to becoming a true global cultural capital involves becoming part of the greater international community and supporting cultural preservation and education where needed. Ultimately, such generosity would benefit the UAE's growing class of cultural workers by giving them the opportunity to learn with and from people of diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Cultural heritage encompasses more than buildings in the Emirates. A visit to the al-Dafra Festival, which is completed by the Camel Beauty Contest, offers a glimpse of Bedouin life as well as the intersection of living cultural heritage and the modern world.⁷ While families "walk" their camels to the contest,

sometimes for days or weeks from as far away as Saudi Arabia, the prizes for the most beautiful camel consist of white SUVs and cash. Camels are evaluated according to long-established principles of dromedary excellence, which have been configured into a computer program developed especially for the annual contest. The fact that the elites of Abu Dhabi all attend the festival with their families testifies to the importance placed on preserving living cultural heritage, even if it is enhanced by fancy cars and modern technology.

The Arts. Abu Dhabi has developed rich and varied programs encompassing education and production in the areas of literature and poetry, film and television, and the visual arts. Hissan Hilal, Saudi Arabian housewife turned fearless poet, has been involved in multiple aspects of Abu Dhabi's cultural life. Her rise to fame shows how tightly tradition and modernity are interwoven in Abu Dhabi, as well as the extent to which living culture informs life in Abu Dhabi, even without the Saadiyat Island museums.

The *Million's Poet* television program introduced Hilal to the Arab world. Originated by Nashwa al-Ruwaini, one of the Middle East's leading media executives, *Million's Poet* marries traditional Bedouin poetry in the Nabati style with the fast-paced competition of *American Idol*. Not only has this unlikely union developed a following for Nabati poetry among the Arab public, but it has also provided a platform for women to hold forth in verse on controversial topics such as women's rights and religious extremism.

Hilal is one of several women who

have reached the final rounds of the competition—a feat that requires both the approbation of the judges and the call-in support of the public. While the image of a veiled social critic may confound western audiences, Hilal has risked death threats to voice her biting criticism of “subversive and ad hoc fatwas.”⁸

The poetry equivalent of a rock star, Hilal also has been celebrated at an ADACH project, the Abu Dhabi Book Fair, where she was a featured speaker in 2011. Organized in partnership with the Frankfurt Book Fair, the annual event defies any predictions of the demise of the book as a literary form. In 2011, over 200,000 visitors browsed among the stalls of 875 publishing houses from 58 participating countries (545 from 17 Arab countries). They could choose from among more than 100 talks and discussions featuring 130 presenters. Since 2006, the number of participating publishing houses and countries has almost tripled.⁹

Not surprisingly, the Abu Dhabi Book Fair has not attracted as much media attention as architectural designs by Frank Gehry and Norman Foster, but the Book Fair has helped to create a dialogue of ideas between Abu Dhabi and the world. The Kalima translation initiative also has helped to open readers in Abu Dhabi, as well as elsewhere in the Arab world, to ideas from other languages. By supporting new voices in the Arab world such as Hilal, the Book Fair also fosters the spirit of inquiry and dissent that are essential components of any truly vibrant cultural environment.

Film and Television. Hilal is also the subject of a documentary that has

earned the coveted support of the Abu Dhabi Film Festival’s (ADFF) Sanad fund.¹⁰ Established under the leadership of Peter Scarlett and Marie-Pierre Macia, Sanad (“support” in Arabic) grants provide development and post-production funds for Arab cinema, with a special category for Emirati filmmakers added this year.¹¹ Five Sanad-funded feature films earned places at ADFF 2011, a testament to the success of the program.

Now in its sixth year, the ADFF has moved from its home in the sumptuous Emirates Palace hotel to the Fairmont Hotel, a shift that symbolizes the Festival’s evolution from the extravagant glamor of the early years to a sharper focus on supporting filmmakers and developing audiences. Screenings now sell out in contrast to the relatively empty theaters characteristic of the Festival’s first years. Building audiences takes time, and festival organizers are in for the long haul.

“ADFF has grown into a serious film festival, one that goes beyond the red carpet glitz, although it has that, too. It supports film-making in the region with desperately needed funds for emerging artists,” observed Khaled Abol Naga, a frequent ADFF participant, Egyptian filmmaker, actor, and activist.¹²

After early forays into filmmaking on a global scale, Abu Dhabi Media Company increasingly has emphasized developing capacity in the Arab world.¹³ Together with Twofour54, a media and entertainment hub, Image Nation, a film and television production company, has launched *Arab Film Studio* to identify, train, and produce new talent in film. At the same time, Image Nation

also has signed deals with some of the most respected filmmakers in Hollywood, such as Walter Parkes, former head of DreamWorks Pictures. "Image Nation's leadership strives to balance international investment, in companies like Hyde Park, Participant, and our own, with a real commitment to building a local and regional film capability," said Parkes.¹⁴

The first Emirati feature ever screened at the Festival, the 2011 coming of age story *Sea Shadow*, directed by Nawaf al-Janahi, points to the emergence of an ecosystem for film making in Abu Dhabi. Initially funded as a short film by the Emirates Foundation, *Sea Shadow* was picked up by Image Nation, making it the first feature by an Emirati director to be produced by the Abu Dhabi-based company.¹⁵ The success of *Sea Shadow* aside, Abu Dhabi ultimately also will be judged by how much it supports film in countries with gifted filmmakers but lesser means. In the wake of the revolutions, many new voices seek expression through film. Will Abu Dhabi help them to be seen and heard?

In 2011, the Abu Dhabi Film Festival hosted an unprecedented gathering of Egyptian leaders in film and television that provided "the chance to compare notes about this unforgettable year, and to share thoughts on the future."¹⁶ Sometimes the exchange of ideas can provide almost as important a fuel as funding in the creation of new films.

Visual Arts. Visual arts also have benefitted from moving out of the formal setting of the Emirates Palace Hotel, where exhibitions previously took place, to the lively atmosphere of

the Manara exhibition hall on Saadiyat Island. The large crowds and lively discussions at the fair, which boasted more than forty-five participating galleries exhibiting more than five-hundred artists, showed that the delay in museum construction had not slowed the development of a lively arts scene.

Foreign visitors to the fair were pleasantly surprised by the stimulating, high-quality art on view, along with the free-flowing conversations and panel discussions.¹⁷ Their reactions were similar to those of the guests at the 2010 UAE National Day celebration in Washington, D.C., which showcased contemporary Emirati art and artists. Many guests expressed pleasant surprise at the sight of innovative art coming from the Emirates.¹⁸ Even the most stunning architectural masterpieces will not necessarily nurture a climate of excellence and innovation for art. The art itself will do so. The buzz around Abu Dhabi Art in November 2011 without the new museums gave a taste of Saadiyat Island's potential as a cultural hub.

Private Philanthropy. Private philanthropy also has contributed to both the development and the presentation of arts and culture in Abu Dhabi. Founded in 1996 by Hoda and Mohamed Kanoo, the Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation (ADMAF) combines year long outreach and education programs in arts and culture with the production of the annual Abu Dhabi Arts Festival, which brings world class performers in classical music and theater, as well as visual artists to the UAE. Engaged and committed patrons, Mr. and Mrs. Kanoo have made significant

contributions to the development of a climate for culture in Abu Dhabi. An artist and curator himself, Mohammed Kanoo is the co-owner of Ghaf Gallery, the first independent visual arts space in Abu Dhabi.

The 2012 program "Connecting Cultures" reflects ADMAF's focus on arts and culture as a means to increase understanding across cultures, both within the UAE and with the world.¹⁹ With its Nationals' Gallery program to mentor emerging visual artists, ADMAF

balance modernity and tradition, and to develop a climate that nurtures and sustains new institutions.

Abu Dhabi stands out for the breadth and depth of its cultural programs as well as its ambition to build local ecosystems of creators and audiences. What is still unknown is whether an organic culture can also be nurtured to grow, and eventually, support the architectural masterpieces springing up around the Gulf. The current hiatus in construction and re-assessment of strategy

Abu Dhabi stands out for the breadth and depth of its cultural programs as well as its ambition to build local ecosystems of creators and audiences.

has partnered with other organizations, including the Emirates Foundation, to identify and foster local talent.

Salwa Mikdadi, director of the Arts and Culture program at the Emirates Foundation, has built a network of programs and relationships, including many artistic residencies abroad, to help train arts and culture professionals in the UAE. Mikdadi strives to teach professional independence as well: "You want to give them an opportunity and it is not in a check. This is structured philanthropy. We show them how to do a line item budget. We team them with mentors."²⁰

Conclusion. It is too early to assess the long-term success of any of the cultural initiatives in the Gulf. Like Abu Dhabi, its neighbors also strive to

suggests a desire to do just that.

The final question is whether Abu Dhabi will become a global cultural center. Will it foster the development of arts, culture, and creativity beyond its own borders and share its resources of wealth, access to knowledge, and capacity to convene with countries like Libya, which needs expertise and technological capacity to protect and preserve its ancient heritage? Will it support artists from countries like Egypt, with rich traditions and powerful contemporary voices, but, during this time of transition, minimal funds and infrastructure? Answers to these questions will determine the degree to which Abu Dhabi creates a legacy of arts and culture for the Emirates, the region, the world, or all three.

NOTES

- 1 Vivian Salama, "Abu Dhabi Delays Louvre, Guggenheim, Zayed Plan Citing 'Magnitude of Work,'" Internet, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-10-29/abu-dhabi-delays-louvre-guggenheim-citing-magnitude-of-work-.html> (date accessed: 8 January 2012).
- 2 Jim Quilty, "An Education in Funding Arab Arts," Internet, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/ArticlePrint.aspx?id=157684&mode=print> (date accessed: 14 January 2012).
- 3 "Museum Training Course for Emiratis", Internet, http://www.khalejtimes.com/DisplayArticle08.asp?col=§ion=theuae&xfile=data/theuae/2011/November/theuae_November379.xml (date accessed: 14 January 2012).
- 4 "Sheikh Zayed in quotes," UAE Interact, Internet, http://www.uaeinteract.com/docs/Sheikh_Zayed_in_quotes/18411.htm (date accessed: 27 March 2012).
- 5 Salama al-Shamsi, interview with Cynthia P. Schneider, Washington, D.C., 14 January 2012.
- 6 Sami el-Masri, interview with Cynthia P. Schneider, Washington, D.C., 14 January 2012.
- 7 Cynthia P. Schneider, "The Loveliest Humps West of Abu Dhabi," Internet, <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/12/the-loveliest-humps-west-of-abu-dhabi> (date accessed: 14 January 2012).
- 8 Hassan Hassan, "Million's Poet Finalist Defies Death Threats," Internet, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/millions-poet-finalist-defies-death-threats> (date accessed: 14 January 2012).
- 9 Eliza Ilyas, personal correspondence with author, Washington, D.C., 12 January 2012.
- 10 Stefanie Brockhaus, "Abu Dhabi Film Festival: Projects," Internet, <http://www.abudhabifilmfestival.ae/en/sanad/projects/2011/stefanie-brockhaus> (date accessed: 14 January 2012).
- 11 Unknown, "Abu Dhabi Film Festival: About SANAD," Internet, <http://www.abudhabifilmfestival.ae/en/sanad/about-sanad> (date accessed: 14 January 2012).
- 12 Khaled Abol Naga, personal correspondence with author, Washington, D.C., 15 January 2011.
- 13 Tim Alder, "Image Nation Separates Hollywood Division," Internet, <http://www.deadline.com/2011/10/image-nation-separates-hollywood-division> (date accessed: 14 January 2012).
- 14 Walter Parkes, personal correspondence with author, Washington, D.C., 15 January 2011.
- 15 Twofour54 Abu Dhabi, Internet, <http://two-four54.com/en> (date accessed: 14 January 2012).
- 16 Khaled Abol Naga, personal correspondence with author, Washington, D.C., 15 January 2011.
- 17 Rianne Norbert, personal correspondence with author, Washington, D.C., 3 January 2012.
- 18 Cynthia P. Schneider, "Cultural Diplomacy and the 'Oh, I Didn't Know That' Factor," *The Huffington Post*, 15 December 2010.
- 19 "Abu Dhabi Festival Announces Stellar Line-up of International Talent for 2012," Internet, <http://www.admaf.org/en/pressrelease/abu-dhabi-festival-announces-stellar-line-up-of-international-talent-for-2012.html> (date accessed: 14 January 2012).
- 20 Salwa Mikdadi, interview with Cynthia P. Schneider, Washington, D.C., 7 January 2011.