

# Abundant scarcity

The study of our region's past and evolution of its future fuels columnist CYRIL ZAMMIT's appetite

I've always enjoyed the Venice Biennale of Architecture. For several of its 18 editions, I have attended as a humble visitor, however, this year I was on the exhibitors' side of things having the privilege to be part of the curation team of the National Pavilion of Saudi Arabia.

Overall, it was a strong edition with the exhibition's theme, *The Laboratory of the Future*, showcasing architecture that can go beyond the external aesthetic of a building, and ultimately transform the entire skyline or narrative of a city. Meanwhile, the national pavilions reverted back to their purest function: being a shelter.

The best of which, Brazil, was presented the esteemed Golden Lion Award. Named *'Terra'*, what caught the imagination of the judging panel when it came the Brazil's submission was the novel way of merging the understanding of heritage and identity, by focusing on endangered communities, post-colonial and political tensions, and population displacement.

The common thread of scarcity and heritage, was also present in the contributions from our region. While the UAE pavilion put forward the study of architectural possibilities in arid landscapes; Bahrain instead showcased the impact of climatic conditions in extreme heat and humidity. Elsewhere *'Rethinking, Rethinking Kuwait'* looked at exploring new methods for architectural and urban design that emerge from the intersections of space and time. Finally, with *'Ithr'*, the Saudi Pavilion's focus was examining the symbiotic relationship between material and immaterial or as we put it: (Im)Material Legacy. Each was an intriguing look at human and environmental aspects that affect our region, and the impact they will have on our future.

While Venice occupied the world's attention (and a lot of my time!), things closer to home were no less captivating.

NEOM unveiled a very detailed exhibition about the much heralded 'The Line' and several architectural concepts for its future inhabitants; while The Royal Commission for AlUla unveiled two new museums—Museum of the Incense Road, designed by Asif Khan, and the Contemporary Art Museum, by Beirut-born architect Lina Ghotmeh. Doha also saw the opening of a fantastic new exhibition 'Building a Creative Nation', which will take place across five new cultural venues in the city.

We like to talk about expansions and booms here in the region, but the feeling of the Middle East's contribution to the global conversation is becoming more poignant every year—in fact, every month.

In June, London will be hosting its Design Biennale based on the theme *'Remapping Collaborations'*. There, Abu Dhabi will be exploring its traditions in crafts, Dubai's focus is on desert and space, while, in a perfect mix of the two, Saudi Arabia presents 'Woven', a study that connects traditional sadu weaving with A.I.

For me, it remains the continual study of our past and evolution of our region's future that make the current conversations in design and architecture continue to be so fascinating, regardless of which side of the visitor-exhibitor line you find yourself on. ☺

**THE GULF'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE GLOBAL CONVERSATION IS BECOMING MORE POIGNANT**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ABDULLAH TOUK

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