

## **Museums and Cultural Diplomacy Projects in Qatar and the Middle East**

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Paper presented at Institute of Cultural Diplomacy Conference, Berlin 17-21 December 2013

### **Abstract**

The early 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a large expansion in the cultural sector in the Middle East, a development that is most visible in the creation of a number of iconic new museums in the Gulf region, many of which are still under construction. This paper focuses on Qatar and the ambitious projects and cultural exchange programmes of the Qatar Museums Authority, which was founded in 2005 with a remit to develop museums, cultural institutions and heritage sites in the country. QMA has overseen the development of the Museum of Islamic Art and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art and in 2012 it launched a series of bilateral cultural exchange programmes that include Qatar Japan 2012 and Qatar UK 2013 Years of Culture. In two of the region's largest new museum construction projects, new outposts of the Louvre and Guggenheim are currently being built in the United Arab Emirates, whilst in Saudi Arabia the King Abdul Azziz Center for World Culture is due to open in late 2015.

This paper explores, from a practical rather than theoretical perspective, the degree to which these new museum projects can be seen as tools for cultural diplomacy. The strategic objectives and aspirations of these countries' cultural initiatives are similar in many respects, as they are driving social development within their own borders, and redefining each country's relations with the region and wider global community. However there are also distinctive differences in a range of areas including governance and strategic management, funding models, collection development, programming and branding.

**Key words:** Qatar, museums, culture, national vision

### **Qatar Museums Authority - QMA**

Qatar Museums Authority was founded in 2005 as a government department responsible for the development of museums, cultural institutions and heritage sites in Qatar. Governed by a board of trustees and the chairperson, HE Sheikha Al-Mayassa bint Hamed bin Khalifa Al-Thani, QMA centralizes resources and provides a comprehensive organization for the development of museums and cultural projects. Three years after its foundation QMA opened the Museum of Islamic Art, in an iconic building designed by the acclaimed Chinese-American architect, IM Pei. The stunning architecture and rich collections, bringing together the finest artworks from the Islamic world, immediately placed the tiny state of Qatar on the world map for cultural enthusiasts and museum professionals alike. The building is a statement of intent by QMA to be world leader in the global cultural sector. It also became and remains an essential stop on the itinerary of all diplomatic visits. The museum's architecture and

collections (acquired for the most part in the auction houses of the west) reinforce Qatar's identity as an Islamic Nation. The dazzling objects on display were created by numerous Islamic traditions from Morocco and Turkey to Persia and China, thus connecting Qatar to the history and heritage of an Islamic world that stretches far beyond its borders and the Gulf region.

Mathaf: the Arab Museum of Modern Art opened in 2010 and has since programmed a series of exhibitions that have brought international artists to Qatar from across the world. It is not conceived as a museum of Arab art, rather as a museum that views international modern and contemporary art from an Arab perspective.

In addition to developing museums QMA is responsible for the stewardship and development of heritage sites in Qatar. It has been leading an international team of archaeologist and scientists at Al Zubarah Archaeological Site, a once thriving port on the northern tip of the country, now partly buried beneath the desert. Al Zubarah was designated as UNESCO World Heritage Site, the first such site in Qatar and one of very few in the Arab Gulf states. A new visitor centre highlights the importance of Al Zubarah to the development of trade in the region. Currently under construction, and due to open in 2016, is the Qatar National Museum, which will explore Qatari history and cultural identity through a number of different themes including fashion and dress, architecture and food culture.

### **QMA Programmes and International Collaboration**

QMA exhibition programmes often involve collaboration with other museums, as was seen recently with the 'Hajj: the Journey through Art' exhibition, conceived by the British Museum and developed by MIA for a Qatari audience, and the exhibition of Pearls from the QMA collection at the V&A Museum in London. In 2012 QMA sponsored an exhibition of works by Damien Hirst at Tate Modern in London and a year later appointed one of the world's leading curators, the Italian Francesco Bonami to present the first and largest exhibition of the artist's work ever seen in the Middle East. The opening of this exhibition was attended by a number of art and fashion celebrities from across the world and a large section of Qatar's diplomatic community was also present. Whilst cultural events like this have not replaced more traditional diplomatic activities such as trade negotiations, it seems that they have become a more important part of the mix.

Furthermore the scale and ambition of the museums of QMA makes them by their very nature international. Museum professionals including curators, education experts, visitor services personnel and brand strategists have been recruited to Qatar from all over the world. The exhibition programmes often involve collaboration with other museums, as was seen recently with the 'Hajj: the Journey through Art' exhibition, conceived by the British Museum and developed by MIA for a Qatari audience, and the exhibition of Pearls from the QMA collection at the V&A Museum in London.

In fact culture itself offers interesting models for new global diplomacy, not least because the arts have themselves become globalised. In the fields of sport and classical music, in the visual arts or theatre,

artists and cultural producers increasingly view the world as their stage or canvas. A painter born in Qatar may choose to train in London, live in New York and sell his work in Hong Kong, perhaps through a Dubai art dealer. Traditional artforms may flourish far from their original home thanks to migrant communities and new global audiences. For a small state like Qatar there are immense benefits in being part of this global network and becoming a recognised cultural hub. Knowledge exchange and cultural engagement lead to greater trust between nations, a fact proved by British Council, the UK cultural relations agency in an independent research study carried out in 2012. This trust will be essential for Qatar as it plays an increasingly high profile role in international diplomatic initiatives.

### **Cultural Diplomacy Projects at QMA**

QMA has an Office of Strategic Cultural Relations (OSCR) that develops and promotes cultural diplomacy projects and bi-lateral cultural exchange programs. Central to the work of OSCR are the bilateral 'Years of Culture', launched with Qatar Japan 2012, followed by Qatar UK 2013 and Qatar Brazil 2014. Each year a programme of activities is presented exploring the contemporary and traditional cultures of both countries, including exhibitions, festivals and educational projects. Qatar UK 2013 featured over 100 events and activities with 50 partners, organised under a series of pillars that included arts, science and sport. It included major exhibitions in both countries and reached an audience of nearly 400,000. A key aim of these programmes is to foster understanding of Qatar internationally and deepen understanding of the cultures of the partner country in Qatar. Each Year of Culture seeks to create enduring cultural partnerships on the individual and institutional level and to increase participation and enjoyment of art and culture.

The countries are unilaterally selected after informal consultation by the chairperson's office at QMA and then endorsed through official agreement with the participating country. Plans are already in place for the next seven years to include projects with Saudi Arabia, China, Germany, Russia, India and France. Whilst there is no formal procedure for the selection of each country, and the process is led by QMA, it is noticeable that the exchanges are with countries where there are already strong or developing trade and diplomatic relations. Also noticeable is the fact that two of the Years of Culture coincide with the FIFA World Cup in the partner country. Programmes are developed independently by QMA and various partner institutions and organisations but the Foreign and Culture Ministries of both countries are involved in steering committees and certain key events including exhibition openings and project launch receptions.

### **The Qatar National Vision 2030**

The aspirations of QMA are linked closely to the strategic objectives of the State. In 2008 the former Emir HH Sheikh Hamad Al-Thani and his son and heir H.H. Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani (who succeeded his father in July 2013) set out the **Qatar National Vision 2030**. This strategic plan states that the 'government and people of Qatar aim to build a vibrant and prosperous country in which there is a balance between human, social, economic and environmental development.'

The Vision defines the long-term outcomes for the country in a strategy that places great importance on culture and international cooperation. Key objectives in the QNV 2030 include:

- Development of a spirit of tolerance, constructive dialogue and openness towards others at national and international levels
- Sponsoring and supporting dialogues among civilizations, promoting coexistence between different cultures and religions
- Developing a knowledge-based economy characterized by innovation, entrepreneurship and excellence in education

It can be seen that the activities of QMA correspond directly to these objectives of the National Vision.

### **Abu Dhabi and Saadiyat Island Cultural Development**

In Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates a large scale cultural development is currently under construction on Saadiyat Island, the planned site of five major new museums including the Louvre and the Guggenheim.

The Tourism, Development and Investment Company (TDIC) is overseeing the cultural infrastructure as part of a masterplan that includes high end residential, leisure and tourism facilities, with seven miles of beaches, championship golf courses, luxury hotels and villas. The first museum to open will be the Louvre Abu Dhabi. This project is the result of an intergovernmental agreement between the UAE and France, an alliance that is described as 'the highest level of cultural cooperation ever created between two sovereign countries.' It was recently announced by Aurélie Filippetti, the French minister of culture on an official trip to Abu Dhabi Art fair that the museum's opening will take place on UAE's National Day in December 2015. Alongside the construction of museum and tourist infrastructure, TDIC is already in the process of building new audiences. The company has a programming department in place and is presenting exhibitions, educational initiatives and cultural programmes in a temporary space ahead of the planned opening.

### **King Abdul Azziz Center for World Culture, Saudi Arabia**

The King Abdul Azziz Center for World Culture is currently under construction in Dhahran, Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia, close to the Providence Well where oil was first discovered in significant quantities in 1938. The Center is being financed by the state oil company Saudi Aramco and is billed as the (Saudi Arabian) Kingdom's home for knowledge, creativity and cross cultural engagement. Extensive educational and cultural programming are already underway and temporary exhibitions, housed in tents close to the construction site included contemporary art from the Pompidou Centre in Paris and an

exhibition in Islamic science developed by 1001 Inventions, a British NGO. The centre is conceived to be 'a beacon of social development and cultural progress' and thus support wider policies towards social and intellectual development in Saudi Arabia. The building has been designed by Norwegian architectural practice Snøhetta and its construction has to date involved collaboration and contracting with 38 different countries. Unlike the museum projects of Qatar and the UAE the main target audience of the King Abdulaziz Center appears to be regional and national. This is in part due to the larger population (27m compared to 8m in UAE and 2m in Qatar) but also due to the relatively underdeveloped tourism sector in Saudi Arabia. However it is clear that the project has international ambitions and the funders describe it as 'Saudi Aramco engaging with the world.'

### **Conclusion**

One feature that all the projects described here have in common is distinctive architecture, with two of the museums even built by the same architect, Jean Nouvel. Museum developers here, in common with their counterparts in Asia and the west, perceive the need for an iconic building by an internationally recognised architect. The projects are all paralleled by rapid economic growth and extensive investment in infrastructure as the region emerges as a global commercial and financial hub. Tourism is a significant element of each nation's economic development, as seen most clearly in the creation of Abu Dhabi's cultural district. In this area regional competition for the tourist market is driving much cultural development, whilst regional cooperation is a characteristic of international relations in other areas including security and trade.

More importantly the cultural projects are linked to social development, with education and public programming key parts of their activities. Each country also views museums and a strong cultural sector as being an important part of expressing a national and regional identity. A phrase often heard in the region, and repeated to me a number of times on visits to projects across the region is 'transformation to a knowledge economy'. With abundant, albeit finite resources, these oil and gas rich nations are conscious of the need to diversify their economies in the future.

In Qatar in particular the ambitious museum projects are an integral part of the state's National Vision and the diversification of its economy. The expansion of the cultural sector is accompanied by large scale urban development and huge investments in education, science and research.

The activities of QMA are pushing the boundaries of the traditional museum model and seeking to shape the creativity and imagination of future Qatari generations. Cultural diplomacy is a small but vital part of an extraordinary ambition.

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