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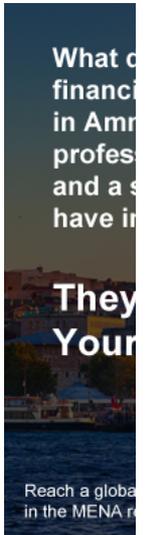
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New hangouts for the creative in Abu Dhabi and Dubai

Lisa Reinisch
Last updated: January 15, 2013

Two new libraries in Dubai and Abu Dhabi provide a meeting point for the creative, the curious and the studious. They also show that grand cultural strategies are beginning to trickle down to street level.

For almost forty years, people in Dubai have been visiting Al Safa Park for the usual reasons: families gather for picnics, nannies escort children to play dates, joggers lap the park's perimeter. Since November 2012, people have also been coming for something new: the books.

The Archive, a library and cultural venue, now occupies a former facilities building dating back to 1975. After a conversion by Japanese interior architect Takeshi Muruyama, the 223 square-metre space has been reconceived as an open-plan, light-filled reading room. The Archive, which specialises in Middle Eastern and North African art literature, is the latest venture of Cultural Engineering, the aptly named philanthropic agency run by hyper-ambitious Emirati brothers Ahmed and Rashid Bin Shabib.

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A sense of hipster entrepreneurialism hangs in the air. Display shelves are laden with eye-catching coffee-table books and handpicked vintage rarities. There is an espresso bar, free wifi and a communal workbench, which give the place the atmosphere of a designer bookshop, even though none of the items on show are for sale. A blackboard details events ranging from book launches and live music to yoga lessons and football coaching for children.

"There is no better place to do something like this than Dubai...Everywhere else it might already be offered or at least be possible to find. It means more in a place like this," enthuses Sarah Malki, The Archive's librarian and programme manager.

The Archive is designed to hold a total of 2,500 books and the collection currently stands at around 550. New titles keep arriving, such as a batch of 100 yellowing volumes donated by a vintage collector in Japan. The books are between 50 and 100 years old, older than the country itself.

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Malki explains The Archive's mission: "We are trying to bring the community together, trying to bring back literature and education to the public; the heritage and the culture of the region. People who are genuinely interested have been walking in and looking around. And that's exactly what we're looking for."

Meanwhile, an hour's drive down the coast, in Abu Dhabi, another, markedly less stylish library-in-the-park is about to open: the UAE and Arabian Gulf Library at Khalifa Park. Reflecting the two cities' differing models of cultural development, this library is a Government initiative. When it opens in early 2013, it will be a unique addition to Abu Dhabi's largest public green space.

"A place like the UAE needs libraries, we cannot do without them," says Sheikha Al Muhairi, head librarian at The National Library. "Librarians like us have a mission to educate the community. I hope that will develop even more in the future."

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While public libraries are declining in Europe and North America, Abu Dhabi has launched more than six new libraries since 2010. Managed by the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority, many of these libraries specifically target the youth.

As does the UAE and Arabian Gulf Library, which plans to provide activities and events for young readers and students. It may have a narrower geographical remit than The Archive, but its collection already holds more than 20,000 books in Arabic and English. While The Archive is clearly miles ahead in terms of style, the UAE and Arabian Gulf Library is unmatched in substance.

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"The general philosophy at the moment is that we want to be able to give access to the community," says Al Muhairi. "People want a refuge where they can just be and do whatever they are doing mentally, without having to pay money for it...where you don't need to consume something. It is a public place and we have all kinds of nationalities and researchers coming in."

A book is not a bomb

Unlike existing facilities such as universities and other research institutions, the two libraries benefit from their lush, informal locations, helping them to attract visitors of all ages. In a region with a disproportionately small book market and low levels of readership, there is certainly a need to rebrand libraries as enjoyable – even cool – places to spend time and study.

Location is not everything, however. Once visitors are through the door, it depends on the quality of the collection whether they will want to stay. The problem is that UAE libraries not only struggle to attract readers, but also to source titles. In 2003, the UN Arab Human Development Report found that, despite a combined population of 284 million at the time, most Arabic bestsellers had a print run of just 5,000 copies. For every one million Arabs, only one book was translated into Arabic each year. In other words, the Arabic book market was woefully underdeveloped.

Ten years later, the situation has not changed much: the average print run of an Arabic book is still only between 2,000 and 3,000 copies, even though the potential market has grown to more than 340 million people, according to Bachar Chebaro, general manager of Arab Scientific Publishers and secretary general of the Arab Publishers Association.

Things haven't always been like this. During the 'Golden Age' of Arab libraries, the European Dark Ages, Arab translators and writers are credited with preserving and developing ancient knowledge and literature.

Inspired by this historical precedent, an international effort to rekindle the production and trade of Arabic books is now underway. Initiatives such as the Sheikh Zayed Book Award, various literature festivals and translation projects, which now turn out hundreds of publications a year, have made progress tangible in the UAE and beyond. Still, far too few Arabic books are written, translated and distributed, and demand continues to be weak.

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Another challenge comes from censorship regulations, which slow down distribution and limit the choice of books on offer. At The Archive, with its emphasis on the subject of art, abounding with controversial images and ideas, books are selected with great care.

"Algeria will never respond directly to Qatar but will try to isolate a country that is increasingly on its own"

Fouad Kemache: Algeria and Qatar relations

“I go through all our books one by one to make sure that there isn’t anything inappropriate in them...I’m not trying to censor or ban anybody’s work; it’s just about respecting the culture and the laws of the country,” explains Malki.

Equally, the UAE and Arabian Gulf Library only stocks works that have been approved by the National Media Council, the UAE’s official censor.

Although the acceptance of critical literature is growing, coming across words or images blacked out by a censor’s marker pen remains a common experience for readers in the UAE. Public opinion appears to flow in a different direction, however. Juma Al Majid, an eminent Emirati businessman and founder of the Juma Al Majid Centre for Culture and Heritage, said in 2010: “A book is not a bomb. It cannot suddenly affect the way people think. How a book affects people depends on how they were educated. Let people read it and decide whether or not to accept it.”

It’s the macro-economy, stupid

Libraries such as The Archive and the UAE and Arabian Gulf Library are not just spontaneous manifestations of cultural growth. They are symptoms of an interesting – some would say surprising – recent shift in the UAE’s development priorities. Art and culture are no longer seen as ‘nice-to-have’ sideshows, but as intangible drivers of very tangible economic diversification and human development.

Announcements of cultural mega-projects in both Abu Dhabi and Dubai, were followed by communications campaigns targeting anyone from school children to bankers with messages promoting the value of creativity, culture and history; especially of the local or regional varieties.

Numerous festivals, competitions and incentives, not to mention star-architect designed cultural districts, complete with museums, universities and performing arts venues, are intended not just to celebrate the arts and nurture local talent, but also to attract high-spending cultural tourists and to boost social development.

Over a relatively short period of time, subjects that were previously seen as irrelevant have become topics of general interest. There is a renewed sense of pride in all manner of creative output emanating from the Gulf region, whether it is art, design, music, film, architecture or literature.

All of a sudden, debates about obscure Bedouin folk tales and the development of Arabic typography are no longer nerd territory. Today it seems that everyone is busy reading up on the old days and getting familiar with the work of contemporary talents.

Of course, it would be wrong to suggest that intellectualism is a completely new phenomenon in the United Arab Emirates, although that is how some would like to portray it. Al Muhairi counters: “People always used to appreciate books. But now they appreciate them in a totally different philosophy.”

“It is about dispelling the negative stereotype,” says Malki, in reference to perceptions of the UAE as a place where shallow consumerism goes hand in hand with a certain intellectual drought.

To Malki, such views misinterpret local history and, more importantly, identity: “Westernisation has transformed the identity; it has created a new identity. That doesn’t mean there is no identity in the UAE or that there is no culture. There really is, you just need to look for it.”

Recommended places to start: the green expanses around Gate 5, Al Safa Park, and the open fields of Khalifa Park – just follow the signs.

The Archive, located near Gate 5, Al Safa Park, Dubai (opening January 2013), www.thearchive.ae

UAE and Arabian Gulf Library, Khalifa Park, Abu Dhabi (opening Q1 2013), [Homepage](#)

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Lisa Reinisch is a journalist from Austria, currently based in the United Arab Emirates. She writes about culture, media and sustainability for magazines in the UK, Austria, the UAE and Australia. In 2011, she researched and wrote a book on the culture and history of the UAE. She is currently working on a second book, about the history of media in the UAE.