

SAUDI ARABIA'S NEW CENTRE FOR SOFT POWER

*The long-awaited King Abdulaziz Center aims to nurture creativity and innovation by offering arts and culture in a spectacular setting, says **Lisa Reinisch***



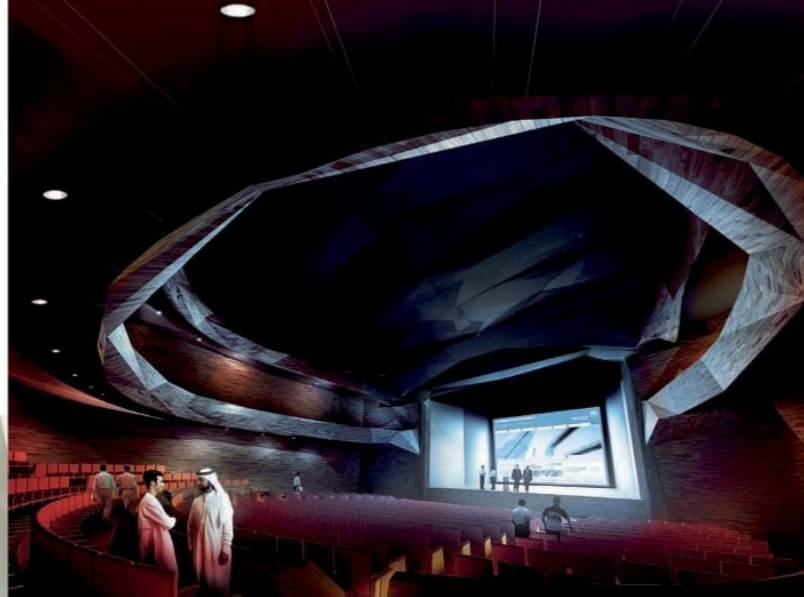
This summer sees the opening of the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Originally slated for completion in 2013, the 100,000 square meter cultural complex bills itself as “the Kingdom’s home for knowledge, creativity and cross-cultural engagement.” Funded by Saudi Aramco, it comprises a museum, an educational centre, a library and an archive, as well as the country’s only performance theatre and public cinema.

Much like the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, the King Abdulaziz Center represents Saudi Arabia’s eagerness to bolster innovation and cultural development. As one of only a handful of public places where men and women are not segregated, the Center symbolises a new openness in Saudi Arabia.

Located in the country’s main oil hub, not far from a site known as Prosperity Well, from where the first commercial oil export took off in 1938, the Center seeks to showcase a narrative arc encompassing the past, present and future.

In turn, the architecture also evokes different aspects of local history, culture and aspirations. Norwegian firm Snøhetta’s highly sculptural design evolves around five rock-like components, with a suspended element, Knowledge Tower, at its centre. The striking facade consists of veils of stainless steel tubes separated by slashes to allow visitors to look out.

Prominent cultural consultant Gail Dexter Lord has described the King Abdulaziz Center as an “engine of soft power.” Headed by Tareq Ghamdi, who succeeded Fouad Therman as director last summer, the Center has



partnered with leading international cultural institutions such as The British Museum, Centre Pompidou, London's Natural History Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) for training, consultancy and to create opening exhibitions for the Center's museum.

Consisting of four galleries, each section of the museum has a different thematic focus: contemporary art from the Middle East at the Funoon (Expressions) Gallery; Saudi identity at the Ajyaal (Generations) Gallery; Islamic art at the Knooz (Treasures) Gallery; and "the beauty and diversity of life on the Arabian Peninsula" at the Natural History Gallery.

For now, the Center has no plans to build its own collection, but will continue to host shows in collaboration with leading international cultural institutions. When asked about the curatorial strategy of the Funoon Gallery and whether it would provide a platform for contemporary regional artists whose works may deal with contentious issues such as women's rights, the Center declined to comment.

A highlight among the opening shows is *Beauty and Identity: Islamic Art from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*. Curated by Linda Komaroff, it features 148 objects from LACMA's extensive Islamic collection of more than 1,700 pieces, which span an area extending from southern Spain to northern India. The show's centrepiece is a never-before-shown period room from Damascus, dating back to 1766. Salvaged from an upper-class home slated for demolition, the room was restored to its former splendour, complete with ornate wall panels and fountain, with financial help from the King Abdulaziz Center over a period of 24 months.

LACMA's objects are on loan to the Center for a period of two years. At any given time, 130 items will be on show, as light-sensitive works on textile or paper will need to be rotated. Aside from the usual complex

logistics involved in organising a travelling exhibition of historical artefacts, Komaroff says the project also held other challenges. "There is a real cultural difference, but not in the way you might think," she says. "It is museum culture versus corporate culture. There is an international language for museum people and there is one, I suppose, for corporations, so sometimes things get lost in translation."

Nevertheless, her team was given a blank slate and was free to bring in any items from LACMA's collection it deemed relevant. "I can't say there was much editing. Some works of art were excluded more because of space—like not having high enough ceilings or sufficient wall space for some of our large architectural elements."

Other opening shows include *Arabian Journeys*, supported by the Natural History Museum, which explores the roots of Saudi Arabia, as well as two exhibitions in collaboration with The British Museum on the themes of calligraphy, and local culture and identity.

With estimated construction costs of over \$400 million, the King Abdulaziz Center is a strategic investment by Saudi Aramco into the country's budding knowledge economy. Over the decades, Saudi Aramco has played a pivotal role not just in Saudi Arabia's economic but also its cultural development, starting with the launch of many of the country's (even the region's) first media and cultural initiatives in the 1940s and 50s.

From its location to its programming to its design, the King Abdulaziz Center aims to nurture creativity and innovation while also bolstering cultural identity, especially among the Kingdom's younger population. It will be interesting to see how diverse a range of creative voices it will be able to welcome. ■

kingabdulazizcenter.com



This page and facing page: Interior and exterior renderings of the proposed King Abdulaziz Center in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia