Although projects devoted to cultural endeavors, including museums, art centers, theaters, and performance complexes, are not new to the region, more have been conceived there during this period than any time before. A confluence of factors has brought about this recent proliferation. These cultural projects are partly an exercise in nation building. Many are sponsored by governments and are intended as national symbols celebrating national history, as with the King Abdul Aziz Historical Center in Riyadh. They also present the state as patron of the arts on a grand scale. This is the case with the Saadiyat Island museums in Abu Dhabi, the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, and the National Theater of Bahrain, which is part of a larger complex that eventually will include a series of cultural buildings.

In some cases, these cultural projects are presented basically as tourist attractions. This role has been clearly stated for the Saadiyat Island museums and the Dubai Opera House. These ambitious projects also aim at asserting a global presence for their cities. In that sense, they are among the clearest examples of the architectural "keeping up with the Joneses." An unusually large number of performance centers, museums, and museum additions have been constructed in cities throughout the world this past decade, very often by celebrity architects. As the cities of the region, particularly ones with deep pockets, aspire to establish a global presence, it is not surprising that they would follow suit and embark on similar cultural projects. For their design, some of the world’s most acclaimed architects have been engaged, including Tadao Ando, Norman Foster, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, and Jean Nouvel.

The predominance of Western architects in designing those cultural projects is overwhelming. With the exception of the ones from Jordan, and the partial exception of the King Abdul Aziz Historical Center in Saudi Arabia, all the projects featured in this section have been designed by Western architects. And even in Jordan, a new performance center is being designed by Zaha Hadid.¹

A few remarks should be made about museums specifically. There obviously is a need for them, and there still is room for more of them in the region. The region’s material heritage is very rich, particularly in the Levant and western Arabia. National museums that house impressive local historical collections had been established in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria during the mid-twentieth century, when they were under British and French domination. Now a new ambitious wave of museum construction is under way, but is mainly concentrated in the rich countries of the Gulf, where museology is a less-established field and has considerable room for growth. Of
course, museum construction also continues to take place outside the Gulf, as is the case in Jordan, where a sizable new national museum designed by Jafar Tukan is nearing completion.

The Fertile Crescent and western Arabia have enough local historical artifacts (and, in a number of cases, local works of modern art) of high significance to support their museums. In the case of Abu Dhabi and Qatar, however, their collections have been recently purchased or will be loaned from abroad. This, in certain ways, parallels developments that took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe and North America. Significant museum collections were being built up then, with a good part of their content acquired from outside the countries where they were located.

Architecturally and even institutionally, a number of these new museums fit comfortably within a global network of similar cultural projects. In this, they are not seen as local institutions conceived for the unique settings of the sites and cities where they are located. More specifically, one of the Saadiyat Island museums is institutionally linked to the Guggenheim Museum in the United States, and another to the Louvre in France.

It is against these various remarks that the Peace Center in Bethlehem and the projects in Jordan stand out. The Peace Center, designed by Swedish architect Snorre Lindquist, provides an example of the sensitivity that Scandinavian architecture often expresses in terms of scale, use of locally prevalent materials, and incorporation of natural light. This makes it well suited to the city where Jesus was born and allows it to softly negotiate Bethlehem’s highly charged political, religious, and historical contexts.

The Jordanian projects involve a number of prominent local architects, all currently in their forties, thus representing a second or even third generation of the young country’s architectural evolution. These architects have been given the opportunity to design works of considerable cultural significance: an addition to a prestigious center for the arts, the headquarters of a well-established organization involved in nature conservation, and a national children’s museum. The Darat al-Funun addition and the Nature Center provide carefully thought-out solutions for inserting public cultural projects into the delicate fabric of Amman’s older residential neighborhoods, which are under the continuous threat of new development. The two projects also masterfully interact with their dramatically sloping sites. Such sites are the norm in Amman’s older districts, where the city’s hilly terrain emerges from the flat downtown valley.

The design of the Children’s Museum is an architectural celebration of the child’s interactive exploration of her world in a country where a significant segment of the population is young. Moreover, the project has presented its architects with a unique opportunity to communicate with the country’s largest demographic group. Of course, it should not be discounted that all these various projects, in one way or another, also are expressions of a new growth spurt affecting the region’s cultural life and the creative energies that have accompanied it.

NOTE

1. The adjective “Western” also applies to Zaha Hadid. Although born and raised in Iraq, she received her architectural education and began her career in the United Kingdom. She has been based in London for decades and is a British citizen. She only began designing in the region after achieving international prominence.
The National Theater of Bahrain, which was commissioned by the Bahraini government, is located along the shores of the Gulf, in proximity to the site of the 1988 National Museum. The two form part of a civic complex that eventually is intended to include a national library, an aquarium, and a children’s museum.

The National Theater’s main feature is a 750-person theater hall. In addition, it includes a second theater hall with a 150-person capacity that also may be used as an exhibition space. The main theater hall takes on the form of a dominant, soft egg-shaped mass with a bright yellowish shine. The theater mass is surrounded by a lower U-shaped arrangement of wings on three sides, and an entrance foyer on the eastern side, resulting in an arrangement that the architects present as an analogy to the traditional courtyard building. The two-story wings include the small theater hall, as well as a cafeteria, a VIP lounge, and various service and administrative spaces. The whole complex is encased within a transparent frame of slender columns carrying a thin flat roof from which the mass of the main theater hall protrudes.
Figures 4.1.1–4.1.4. The National Theater of Bahrain will form part of a civic complex that includes the preexisting National Museum. The complex eventually will also feature a national library, an aquarium, and a children’s museum. The mass comprising the main theater space of the National Theater building stands out in relation to the rest of the complex through its dominant size and bright color.
Children's Museum, Amman, Jordan

Designed by the Jordanian firm Faris and Faris Architects, with interior designs carried out by the Jordanian architectural firm Tahhan and Bushnaq Consultants. The British firm Haley Sharpe Design was responsible for exhibit designs. Completed in 2007.

The firm Faris and Faris Architects was established in 1996 by two young Jordanian architects, Faris Abdul Rahman and Faris Zaru, both of whom had studied architecture at the University of Jordan. The Children’s Museum is the most significant project that their active practice has realized so far. A competition was held for the project, as a result of which they were chosen as lead architects. They also were asked to team up with another firm that had participated in the competition, Tahhan and Bushnaq Consultants, which would take on the role of interior designer. Tahhan and Bushnaq Consultants was founded during the 1980s by Ismail Tahhan and Zaher Bushnaq, who both studied architecture at the University of Jordan and had taught there for some time.

This public museum targets children up to 14 years old, who make up 40 percent of Jordan’s population, and aims at supporting a spirit of exploration and self-discovery in them while addressing issues such as safety and the requirements of children with special needs. In designing the project, the architects presented their challenge as a quest to create an interactive building that provides an architectural manifestation of the Chinese proverb “I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand.”

The project, which is located on a two-hectare site and has a built-up area of about 7,350 m², consists of one expansive low-lying structure that incorporates strong variations in form and color. Its main features include a long curving wall articulated by three colorful cubic protrusions, a spherical planetarium located at the structure’s eastern corner, and a cylindrical exhibition area located at the opposite end of the museum, at its western edge.

The museum includes exhibition halls, workshop spaces, a planetarium, a library, a computer lab, a museum shop, and a restaurant, as well as administrative and storage spaces. It also has an outdoor exhibit area and an outdoor theater. The site’s outer walls feature twelve prominently displayed large concrete panels, each measuring 3.5 × 1.75 m and exhibiting a drawing painted directly on it by Jordanian children. Each panel represents one of the country’s administrative districts.

The architects state that children’s play cubes, with their primary colors and shapes, served as a main source of inspiration for the design. This theme of colorful play cubes is used as a common theme throughout the complex, both on the inside and outside. It is evident in the overall shape of spaces and in various educational display tools. Even the name of the museum is written on a series of large cubes located near the building’s entrance. The theme of the play cubes is most strongly expressed, however, in the three sizable aluminum-clad protrusions located along the building’s long curving facade, with each displaying one of the primary colors: red, blue, and yellow.

The building incorporates a variety of materials with differing textures. Concrete is the primary building material. Metal also is used. In addition to aluminum panels, a steel grid is incorporated to envelope parts of the building and to hold deciduous climbing plants. Local stone is used for some of the walls, with color-changing fiber-optic light strips placed between the stone blocks to give the walls a theatrical, dynamic character.

Since the completion of the Children’s Museum in Amman, Faris and Faris Architects have been commissioned to design a children’s museum in the city of Manama in Bahrain.
Figures 4.2.1–4.2.4. The Children’s Museum in Amman incorporates primary forms and colors, including a spherical planetarium, a large cylindrical exhibition area, and a long curving wall along which are located three aluminum-clad red, blue, and yellow cubic protrusions.

Figure 4.2.5. Preliminary design by Faris and Faris Architects for a children’s museum in Manama.
Darat al-Funun—The Khalid Shoman Foundation Upper Facade Renovation, Amman, Jordan


This relatively small project consists of developing a new front for the upper part of the Darat al-Funun—The Khalid Shoman Foundation complex, including its northern entrance. It also features a few general restorations for this non-profit foundation for the arts.

Part of the challenge of working on this project was to address its immediate context, since it is located in one of the first districts that emerged in modern Amman around the 1920s. Moreover, the Darat al-Funun complex features layers of history. In addition to a number of structures dating from the 1920s to the 1940s, the site houses the remains of a sixth-century Byzantine church built over a Roman temple, all occupying a good part of a city block that slopes up to the north. The initial rehabilitation of this evolving and expanding complex was carried out during the early 1990s by Jordanian architect Ammar Khammash, when Darat al-Funun was established.

Al Hiyari’s design incorporates a wall with concrete blocks protruding from it at different levels of projection. The result is a lively surface that combines the visual characteristics of concrete with a feel for the texture of the roughly dressed stone blocks commonly used in Amman, especially during the 1920s and 1930s. In order to ensure that the work is carried out at a high level of precision and to protect the projecting concrete blocks from chipping, Al Hiyari had them sandwiched between horizontally placed steel plates. The projections are primarily located at the walls’ edges and corners, but fade away as one moves toward the wall’s middle stretches.

Al Hiyari also treats the entry process into the complex as a low-keyed but ritualistic process that leads the visitor down a set of stairs through a tight “funnel” space open to the sky. From there, the visitor makes a 90-degree turn to face a framed view of Amman’s old downtown area and its surrounding hills.

The project also includes a carport that houses the automobile of the late Khalid Shoman, the patron of the foundation and to whose memory it is dedicated. Al Hiyari designed the carport out of steel sheets that were welded together to create a continuous surface that constitutes four faces of a six-sided box. He conceived the structure in a manner that only required very basic cutting, assembling, and welding skills from blacksmiths and welders, but that nonetheless presents a high level of precision and even projects a “high-tech” feel. It also provides an appropriate shelter for the automobile, a main icon of the industrial age. As with his earlier Work and Consultation Space for a Psychologist, the design expresses Al Hiyari’s methodology of using simple materials and techniques in a manner that takes the everyday industrial vernacular in the developing world as a point of departure and changes it to reveal completely new potentials and possibilities.
Figures 4.3.1–4.3.4. This intervention addresses a site that houses the remains of a sixth-century Byzantine church and a number of structures from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, all of which have been rehabilitated into the Darat al-Funun—The Khalid Shoman Foundation complex. The intervention included developing the northern part of the site so as to better integrate it within the overall complex and also to give it additional prominence.
Nature Center, Amman, Jordan


This project was commissioned by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN), a leading Jordanian NGO, to include educational, administrative, and income-generating functions. The Nature Center is located within a relatively dense urban context, in the historical Jabal Amman First Circle area, on a dramatic site overlooking Amman’s downtown core. The project’s 2,180 m² site has a steep incline of over 45 degrees and drops the equivalent of seven stories from its highest to lowest parts. Such steep inclines are common along the hilly terrain surrounding Amman’s downtown area.

The area in which the site is located was one of Amman’s most prominent residential districts until the 1960s, but it underwent a process of gradual decline after that. A resurgence of the area has been taking place since the mid-1990s as structures in it have been rehabilitated for residential, cultural, and commercial uses.

The building takes up four stories occupying more than 1,500 m², and is placed on concrete stilts that reach a height-equivalent of three additional stories. The stilts, which are arranged in a trusslike formation, are intended to allow vegetation to grow, including the wild vegetation that had existed on the site before the building was constructed.

The structure consists of a number of masses connected by open-air pedestrian bridges located above the site’s steep incline. It houses various functions, including studios intended for visiting researchers, offices for RSCN, a gift shop, and a restaurant with both inside and outside spaces. The restaurant provides panoramic views of the downtown area and the surrounding urban hills, including the historical Amman Citadel.

The building has two faces. The southern facade facing the upper street is sheathed with roughly textured stone blocks, thus reflecting the early and mid-twentieth-century stone residential architecture of the surrounding area. The northern facade, which faces the downtown area and opens up to it through a V-shaped plan configuration, in contrast has roughly executed and textured concrete surfaces. It is intended to relate to the poorer-quality structures built along the lower parts of its hill, closer to the downtown core, that emerged as the area underwent a period of decline.

Ammar Khammash consciously incorporated low-cost materials in the building. Recycled materials also were used, such as smelted aluminum soft-drink cans, which were used as inserts for floor tiles. Cans also were reshaped and placed in furniture items such as the front reception desk.
Figures 4.4.1–4.4.4. The Nature Center strongly interacts with its steeply inclined site, which affords spectacular views of Amman’s older parts. Its use of materials simultaneously acknowledges both the affluent stone residences that were built in the area during the first half of the twentieth century and the lower-income concrete structures that began to appear there as the area declined during the 1970s and 1980s.

The Peace Center, built by the Bethlehem Municipality, is located along the northern side of Manger Square, in proximity to the historic Church of the Nativity. The costs of this structure, which amounted to $6.7 million, were primarily covered through support from the Swedish government.

The 3,800 m² building opens up to the square at ground level through an arcade of imposing metal and glass gates. The building’s formal arrangement combines cubic volumes of differing heights and openings of different sizes. Two towers, which find their inspiration in traditional wind towers, act as primary visual markers for the building exterior, and provide natural lighting and ventilation for its large multistory foyer space.

Upon entering the building at ground-floor level, one encounters an area containing a bookshop, a tourist information center, and a restaurant. Next to it is a children and youth center that includes reading and recreational facilities. The second-floor centers on the foyer space, which is surrounded by three exhibition galleries and an auditorium. The building’s white-washed, minimalist spaces with their generous natural lighting evoke images of early and mid-twentieth-century Modernist Scandinavian architecture.

The structure’s exterior is clad with a local white-yellow stone. Snorre Lindquist also incorporates into the building’s openings interlaced stonework with cross-shaped patterns. These are inspired by traditional wooden mashrabiyyah screens, which historically were used to filter exterior light and provide privacy.
Figures 4.5.1–4.5.5. In his design for the Peace Center along Manger Square in Bethlehem, Swedish architect Snorre Lindquist incorporates facades sheathed with local stone, *mashrabiyyah*-inspired stone grills, and towers that find their inspiration in traditional wind towers. The overall arrangement evokes images of early- and mid-twentieth-century Scandinavian architecture with its whitewashed, minimalist, and naturally lit spaces.
Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, Qatar


The $100 million Museum of Islamic Art was conceived as one of five “heritage houses” that the Qatari government planned along the Doha Corniche to help establish Doha as a cultural center. The other four museums are the Qatar National Library, the National History Museum, the Museum of Photography, and the Museum of Traditional Clothes and Textiles, but they have not been realized. The 35,500 m² museum is located on an artificial island situated 60 m off the Doha Corniche, surrounded by a 20-hectare park.

The museum houses the sizable collection of Islamic art that the Qataris have been putting together since the 1990s and that has an estimated value of $1.2 billion. In addition to exhibition spaces, the five-story building includes a large atrium, an educational wing, a conservation center, a 200-seat auditorium, a restaurant, prayer areas for men and women, a bookstore, and a gift shop.

Pei, who was born in 1917, announced that this would be his last project. He states that he found inspiration for the museum’s design in the ninth-century Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo. He was especially fascinated by the mosque’s cubic shapes, including the pure geometric form of the ablutions fountain located in the center of its courtyard (which in fact is the result of a later addition from the Mamluk period, at around 1300). These shapes interact with the strong sun of the region, resulting in changing light and shade patterns.

The design is highly geometric and sculptural. It consists of modules that fit within the outline of a pyramid topped by a cube. It also may be viewed as a three-dimensional projection of a set of interlocking two-dimensional geometric patterns that share the same center.

The project is sheathed with the glittering white Shamisen stone imported from France. The stone is characterized by high resistance to the effects of water, humidity, and heat.
Figures 4.6.1–4.6.5. The form of the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha provides a three-dimensional projection of a set of interlocking two-dimensional patterns that share the same center. Moreover, I. M. Pei states that he found inspiration for the design of this building in the ablutions fountain of the medieval Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo.
The King Abdul Aziz Historical Center, also known as al-Murabba’ Development Project, is a $182 million project that includes al-Murabba’ Palace complex, which King Abdul Aziz (r. 1902–53), the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, had constructed during the 1930s. It aims at presenting Saudi Arabia’s history and celebrating the life of the country’s founder. The project was inaugurated on January 22, 1999, which is the Hijri (Muslim calendar) centennial of King Abdul Aziz’s recapture of Riyadh (1902 ad/1319 ah).

The Murabba’ Palace complex originally was built about 2 km to the north of the old city of Riyadh, and it provides the first example of the city’s extension beyond its defensive walls. It covered an area of 16 hectares and obtained its name (the Square Palace) from being a walled enclosure that encompassed a square area of 400 × 400 m. The palatial complex included residences for the king and members of his family and retinue, as well as administrative buildings. The complex follows traditional forms and construction techniques prevalent in central Arabia at that time. Its architecture therefore consists of solid masses punctuated by courtyards. Sun-dried mud-brick is used for its walls, and Tamarisk tree trunks plastered with mud are used for its roofs.

The project, which covers an area of 37 hectares, incorporates conservation work as well as replicas of preexisting buildings and new buildings. New buildings added to the complex include the National Museum and Darat al-Malik Abdul Aziz (King Abdul Aziz Foundation for Research and Archives). A mosque and water tower from the 1970s were renovated as part of the project. In addition, the complex features a public park and a raised plaza with 100 palm trees symbolizing the passing of 100 years since the recapture of Riyadh.
Figures 4.7.1–4.7.2. The King Abdul Aziz Historical Center includes the renovation and development of the palace complex that King Abdul Aziz, the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, had constructed during the 1930s. New buildings added to the complex include a national museum and a documentation center on Saudi history and culture.
Designed by the Canadian firm Moriyama and Teshima Architects, with exhibit design and museology services provided by the Canadian firm Lord Cultural Resources Planning and Management as well as the Royal Ontario Museum. Completed in 1999.

The $58.6 million National Museum of Antiquities occupies almost 36,000 m² and is Saudi Arabia’s largest. The museum, which was designed through an international competition, is intended to tell the story of Saudi Arabia from prehistoric times to the present.

Its main design features include a long curved west wall sheathed with local limestone that faces and embraces al-Murabba’ Square and garden as well as al-Murabba’ Palace complex, which is located across the square and garden. As the wall faces west, it glows with the red of the setting sun at the end of the day. The architects compare the wall’s visual impact to that of a canyon lining a wadi (valley), thus providing a reminder of Riyadh’s beginnings as an oasis village in the desert. The curve of the wall also is intended to harmonize with the museum’s cylindrical exhibition hall (the “Unification Drum”), which rises above the museum’s flat roof. The building surfaces primarily are covered with limestone and granite quarried from various regions in Saudi Arabia.

The museum’s architecture is intended to draw inspiration from the vernacular building traditions of the central Arabian region of Najd (in which Riyadh is located), with its simple mud-brick walls and restrained surface decoration. However, it makes no direct quotations from those traditions, and instead projects a clear contemporary feel, primarily characterized by horizontally expansive building surfaces. In spite of some similarities between it and Rasem Badran’s traditionalist nearby Darat al-Malik Abdul Aziz, mainly evident in the prevalence of earth-toned stone surfaces, the two complexes present markedly different architectural vocabularies.

The museum architects incorporated simple devices to address Riyadh’s soaring temperatures, which easily can exceed 40°C (104°F) in the summer. Thick walls and small windows therefore are used to reduce heat gain. Arcades, overhead trellises, and lattice partitions provide shade, while fountains and pools inject humidity into the hot dry air to lower temperatures. Interior open-air courtyards collect the cool evening air.

An emphasis also has been placed on making the building inviting to visitors. Views of the interior are available from the outside, and entrances are located along all four sides of the complex. A large entrance lobby that is independent of the exhibition area is open beyond the museum’s opening hours and includes a public prayer area to encourage people to use it. The surrounding gardens also have water play areas for children. All this makes the museum’s gardens busy after sunset, when they are used by families who come out to take advantage of the cool evening air.

The museum is popular with visitors, and it contributed to Riyadh’s UNESCO designation as the Arab World’s Cultural Capital for 2000. In addition, it was awarded an Honorable Mention from the Ontario Association of Architects’ Good Design Is Good Business Awards for its success in achieving the client’s goals.

The building was opened as scheduled on January 22, 1999, marking the centennial of King Abdul Aziz’s recapture of Riyadh, and only 26 months after design work was initiated.
Figures 4.8.1–4.8.4. The National Museum in Riyadh has as its main design feature a long curved west wall sheathed in local granite that glows as the sun sets. The wall is intended to allude to a canyon lining a valley, thus providing a reminder of Riyadh’s origins as an oasis village in the desert.
Designed by Jordanian architect Rasem Badran of Dar al-Omran, with exhibit design and museology services provided by the Canadian firm Lord Cultural Resources Planning and Management. Completed in 1999.

The King Abdul Aziz Foundation for Research and Archives aims at carrying out documentation and research on Saudi Arabia’s history, geography, arts, and architecture. It contains a memorial hall, an automobile exhibition, a library and research section, an auditorium, administrative quarters, and a section devoted to female researchers.

The Foundation is incorporated within the site of the preexisting mud-brick al-Murabba’ Palace complex, and the project involves the conservation of a few of its buildings. It also is connected to a renovated mosque originally built in the 1970s.

The architecture of the 7,000 m² project heavily incorporates traditional architectural vocabularies from the region of Najd in central Arabia, where Riyadh is located. It therefore consists of solid cubic masonry courtyard buildings with small punched-in window openings.

The building masses generally are unadorned, with minor exceptions such as the small finials topping building corners and the single rows of triangles-in-relief articulating building surfaces. The design of the complex, however, also incorporates modernistic steel and glass elements including balustrades, skylights, trusses, and walkways that are intended to contrast with its traditionally inspired solid masonry architecture.

The Foundation’s memorial hall commemorates King Abdul Aziz and includes display cases that exhibit a few of his personal belongings. The automobile exhibition features a number of vintage automobiles, including a Rolls-Royce limousine given to the king by British prime minister Winston Churchill. The automobiles also are visible to those passing by from the outside along a path that faces its floor-to-ceiling windows.
Figures 4.9.1–4.9.4. The King Abdul Aziz Foundation for Research and Archives is integrated within the 1930s mud-brick al-Murabba’ Palace complex and is strongly influenced by its traditional central Arabian Najdi architecture. It also combines traditional architectural features with modernistic steel and glass elements.
Overall master plan developed by the U.S. firm Gensler. Master plan for the island’s Cultural District developed by the American firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM).

Under construction.

The Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority plans to transform Saadiyat (Sa’diyyat) Island, the 27 km² natural island located just 500 m off the shore of Abu Dhabi City, into a tourist destination. It established the Tourism Development & Investment Company (TDIC), which will oversee Saadiyat’s mixed-use development and will operate along strictly commercial lines. Land will be sold to private investors who would develop their plots according to the preset master plan. Abu Dhabi aims at achieving a growth of over 11 percent in the number of tourists visiting the emirate, and Saadiyat Island will form an essential component of its tourism growth strategy.

The island will be developed in three phases between 2006 and 2018 and will form the Middle East’s largest single natural island development. TDIC will develop the island’s infrastructure, which is estimated to cost over $1.5 billion.

The island will be linked to Abu Dhabi City by two 10-lane bridges, one of which will accommodate a light rail lane. Ferry service also is being considered, and an emphasis will be made on providing adequate pedestrian and bicycle paths. Water and energy conservation as well as the environmental protection of the island as a nesting ground for birds and as a mangrove reserve also are presented as part of the overall development plan.

The island is intended to eventually house 150,000 residents. The project’s publicity materials specify that this is the same population as Oxford in the United Kingdom and Hollywood in the United States.

Ownership restrictions in the island will be relaxed as investors who are not citizens of the Gulf Cooperation Council will be allowed to own property through long-term renewable leases.

The island will feature seven districts: Cultural District, Al Marina, Saadiyat Beach, South Beach, Island Lagoons, Eco Point, and the Wetlands. These will be connected by a palm-lined freeway. The island will have 19 km of beachfront, two golf courses, 29 hotels with more than 7,000 rooms, three marinas with a capacity for 1,000 vessels, more than 8,000 villas and 38,000 apartments, as well as eight “iconic string of pearl” architectural landmarks in the Cultural District housing museums and a concert hall. These include the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi by American architect Frank Gehry, the Performing Arts Center by Iraqi-born British architect Zaha Hadid, the Museum of Classical Art by French architect Jean Nouvel, the Maritime Museum by Japanese architect Tadao Ando, and the Shaykh Zayed National Museum by British architect Norman Foster. All are among the world’s best known contemporary architects and are recipients of the prestigious architectural Pritzker Prize.

The Cultural District will be the largest single arts and culture development project carried out in recent years.
Figures 4.10.1–4.10.5. Saadiyat Island, a 27 km² natural island, is being developed as a major tourism and cultural destination in Abu Dhabi. Its Cultural District will house a number of cultural facilities including the Maritime Museum by Tadao Ando, the Shaykh Zayed National Museum by Norman Foster, the Guggenheim Museum by Frank Gehry, the Performing Arts Center by Zaha Hadid, and the Museum of Classical Art by Jean Nouvel.
The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi Museum is intended to house contemporary art from around the world. The $200 million, 30,000 m² museum will be located on a prime site at the western tip of Saadiyat Island, in its Cultural District.

Tom Krens, director of the Guggenheim Foundation, played a primary role in bringing Frank Gehry and other internationally acclaimed architects to design the cultural buildings on Saadiyat Island. The museum will be the largest of a network of Guggenheim museums located in New York, Venice, Berlin, and Bilbao.

The building is conceived as a series of galleries that are loosely arranged around open-air courtyards in a manner that resembles a suq with streets and alleys. Entry is through a glass atrium that leads to a court enclosed by an enormous cone-shaped wind tower (one of a number used in the building), which Gehry identifies as modeled on the idea of the “open-topped teepee.” These cone-shaped elements also allude to the wind towers of the Gulf region, which provide a cooling effect by drawing up the warm air. Two large galleries connect to the atrium and are interrupted by several cone-shaped exhibition spaces that are tipped on their sides and open to the surrounding landscape.

Gehry, in explaining the design, states that the characteristics of the site, a desert landscape in close proximity to the waters of the Gulf, suggested some design directions. He describes the plan as having central core galleries of various heights and sizes forming a courtyard between them. These are stacked on top of each other to reach four stories. A ring of larger galleries surrounds the central galleries and radiates from them. These lead to yet another outer layer of galleries that will have the quality of unfinished, raw industrial spaces with exposed lighting systems, and will provide a level of contrast with the more conventional inner galleries. The size and character of these outer galleries will allow them to host a new scale of contemporary art that could be made on site by visiting artists and that would not be possible to house in other museums around the world. The design also emphasizes the idea of flexibility in organizing a variety of shows.

In addition to incorporating wind towers, Gehry will use water walls in the main courtyard to achieve cooling effects. The building exterior probably will be sheathed in stone, with color and texture used to highlight certain parts of it.

Krens worked with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, the designers of the Cultural District, to reconfigure aspects of the master plan. This included adding a 1.5 km canal flanked by 19 pavilions, which would be used to present art and architecture in a manner similar to the Venice Biennale. The pavilions are to be designed by a series of other architects, but Gehry plans to incorporate two of the pavilions as part of his design. He intends to bring them close to the Guggenheim so as to form a courtyard entrance introducing the remaining pavilions.

This museum is being viewed as a basic component of a plan that aims at transforming Abu Dhabi into an important, if not the main, cultural destination in the region. It is conceived as having as powerful a transformation on Abu Dhabi as the Guggenheim in Bilbao had on that city, which it transformed from a decaying industrial urban center into a main destination on the international tourism map.

The Abu Dhabi Tourism and Development Investment Company will own the museum, while the Guggenheim Foundation will establish its program and manage it. The Foundation therefore will be in charge of issues such as collection development, exhibitions, and educational initiatives.
Figures 4.11.1–4.11.2. The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will be part of an international network of Guggenheim museums located in New York, Bilbao, Berlin, and Venice, and will be the largest of them. Its design is conceived as a series of galleries loosely arranged around open-air courtyards and forming three concentric rings of spaces.
Performing Arts Center, Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Designed by Iraqi-born British architect Zaha Hadid of Zaha Hadid Architects.
Designed in 2007, but construction not yet initiated.

The Performing Arts Center is one of a series of cultural buildings located on an axis that extends along the southwestern shores of Saadiyat Island, in its Cultural District, and links Tadao Ando’s Maritime Museum at one end to the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi at the other end. The 62 m high building has a highly sculptural, if not biomorphic, form. It has been referred to as “spaceship-like,” while the New York Times architectural critic, Nicolai Ouroussoff, remarked that it looms “aggressively over the water’s edge” and that its “taut glistening form calls to mind a gigantic snake, its tail tapering off toward the national museum.” Hadid, however, presents it as “a growing organism that sprouts a network of successive branches,” with performance spaces that “spring from the structure like fruits on a vine.”

The complex includes four theaters located beneath a concert hall. The five spaces have a combined seating capacity of 6,300 people. The concert hall has a large window behind the stage that provides views of the sea and of Abu Dhabi City. Each of the four theaters has a lobby that is oriented toward the sea and allows for views of it. A restaurant with a shaded roof terrace is located in the building’s northern part. This in turn is connected to a conference center placed above the theater areas. An academy for the performing arts is situated at the south of the building, above the experimental theater. The building’s “tail,” located at its northeastern edge, has retail areas that connect by a bridge to pedestrian traffic coming from the Cultural District’s central spine.

The “belly” of the main hall rises into the air, with a waterfront promenade passing directly underneath.
Figures 4.12.1–4.12.4. Zaha Hadid’s Performing Arts Center in Abu Dhabi’s Saadiyat Island has a highly sculptural, if not biomorphic, form. It consequently has been described as “spaceship-like” and compared to a gigantic snake that looms aggressively over the water’s edge. In contrast, Hadid presents it as a “growing organism that spouts a network of successive branches.”
Jean Nouvel is no stranger to the Arab world’s cultural scene as he is the architect of the highly acclaimed 1987 Arab World Institute in Paris. The Museum of Classical Art in Abu Dhabi is one of a series of projects he has designed in Kuwait, Qatar, and Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates.

Nouvel describes the Museum of Classical Art as one that deals with what is simultaneously “remote and familiar.” He examined the harsh landscape of the site, the aridity of its land, and the fluidity of the nearby waters of the Gulf. His solution was to merge his “dreamy thoughts” about the site and program “into a simple plan of an archaeological field revived as a small city, a cluster of low-rise buildings placed along a leisurely promenade.”

The complex, with its buildings, plazas, alleyways, and canals, is intended to give visitors the feeling of entering a different world, one that evokes a small city floating on the sea. The main architectural feature is a wide, shallow overreaching dome with a diameter of about 180 m. Nouvel provides the dome, which he emphasizes is an architectural element common to all civilizations, with a translucent ceiling that diffuses incoming light through patterns inspired by traditional Islamic geometric patterns. He presents the filtering of light as a feature in traditional “Arabian” architecture, one that he effectively had used in the Arab World Institute, where the facades incorporate a series of mechanical oculi that expand and retract, like a camera aperture, according to the amount of incoming light. His design for the Arab World Institute was unequivocally modern and even “high-tech,” but also alluded to the Islamic world’s architectural heritage, particularly light-filtering elements such as the wooden latticework panels found in numerous traditions of Islamic architecture.

The museum’s layout includes a series of one-room buildings located along a promenade and submerged into an expanse that extends beyond the cover of the dome. The layout also emphasizes a level of flexibility that allows for the interconnectivity and reconfiguration of gallery spaces to accommodate changing collections, since the museum’s exhibitions will consist of items on loan from other collections during its first years at least. Nouvel also envisions archaeological artifacts, such as works of sculpture and mosaics, not only to be restricted to gallery spaces but also to be placed in the complex’s alleyways and courtyards.

The building, which will occupy an overall area of about 26,000 m², is expected to cost about $108 million.

The French Louvre museum will attach its name to this museum according to an agreement signed between the governments of France and Abu Dhabi and will lend artworks to the new museum. The project is considered a very important expression of cooperation between France and Abu Dhabi. In fact, inauguration of construction on the museum was marked by a ceremony in May 2009 that was attended by French president Nicolas Sarkozy and the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Shaykh Mohammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan.
Figures 4.13.1–4.13.4. The Museum of Classical Art in Abu Dhabi has as its main feature a wide, shallow overreaching dome with a translucent ceiling that diffuses light through patterns inspired by Islamic geometric motifs. A series of informally arranged one-room buildings extend well beyond the cover of the dome.
La Ville Contemporaine Cultural Centre and Opera House (Dubai Opera House), Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Designed by Iraqi-born British architect Zaha Hadid of Zaha Hadid Architects. Designed in 2006, but project remains unbuilt.

La Ville Contemporaine Cultural Centre and Opera House is planned on an artificial island at the end of the Dubai Creek extension. The complex is part of the Lagoons Project, a 650-acre multipurpose residential, commercial, and office development that includes a number of man-made islands linked by bridges.

The complex includes a main auditorium (the opera house) with a seating capacity for 2,500 persons distributed along three levels of balconies and a gallery. Sight lines in the auditorium are kept to a maximum distance of 32 m. The shape of the auditorium also has been designed with acoustic considerations in mind. The walls and ceilings therefore are angled to provide suitable acoustic reflections and reverberations.

The complex also includes a playhouse with a seating capacity for 800 persons. As with the auditorium, an emphasis is placed on providing adequate sight lines, which in this case are limited to 25 m so as to enable audience members to clearly see the performers’ facial expressions. Seating in the playhouse is distributed along two balconies and a gallery.

Because of its amorphous forms and spaces, La Ville Contemporaine has been compared to a sand dune and a starfish.
La Ville Contemporaine Cultural Centre and Opera House, with its amorphous forms and spaces, has been compared to a sand dune and a starfish. Its main components are a 2,500-person auditorium and an 800-person playhouse.