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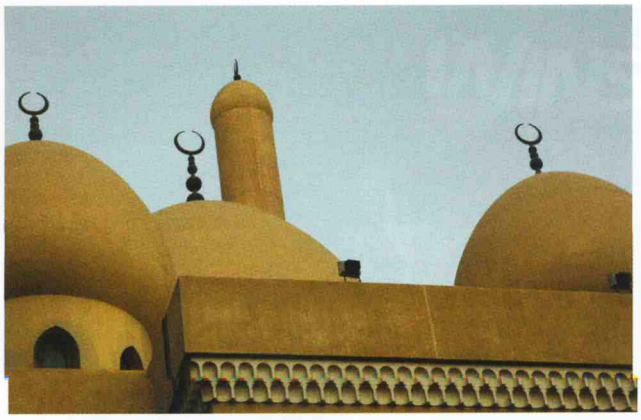
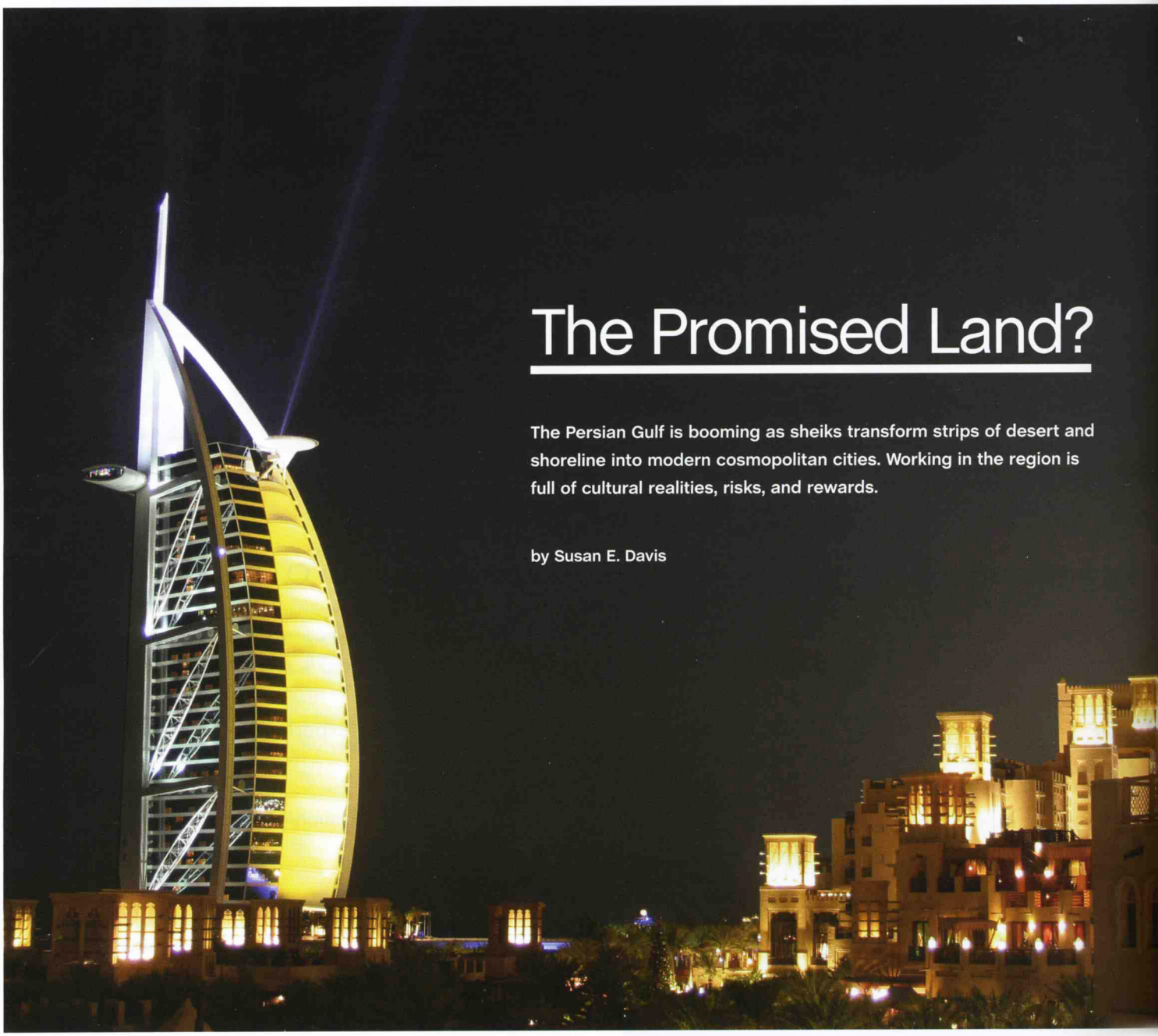


Like much of the Middle East, the port city of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates is a study in contrasts between modernity and ancient tradition. Skyscrapers like the iconic sail-shaped Burj Al Arab Hotel (below) co-exist with traditional Islamic architecture (above). Below the modern city skyline, a more traditional lifestyle exists (opposite page). Jan Lorenc, principal of Lorenc+Yoo Design, captured these photos during his business travels in Dubai.

Not since the pharaohs built the Pyramids has such a building frenzy gone on in the Middle East.

Flush with oil money and determined to fast-forward into the 21st century, modern-day sheiks and sultans are determined to make their countries the envy of all nations. Take the cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. The sheiks there have commissioned fantastic planned communities like the Palms, a cluster of man-made islands, packed with palaces, that collectively form a giant palm tree. Soon the world's tallest building will rise there. Burj Tower, designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, will be 2,625 ft. tall, nearly twice the height of the Empire State Building. Zaha Hadid is designing a visionary Performing Arts Centre in Abu Dhabi, while the Louvre negotiated a $1.3 billion deal to open a Jean Nouvel-designed branch there in 2012. It's estimated that as many as 30 percent of the world's construction cranes are in use in Dubai. No wonder it's earned the nickname "Las Vegas on steroids."

Wherever new buildings are springing up, environmental graphic designers are on the scene. Six firms—some that have done many projects and some with only one project in their portfolio—shared their experiences and recommended ways to make the most of working in this booming region.



The Promised Land?

The Persian Gulf is booming as sheiks transform strips of desert and shoreline into modern cosmopolitan cities. Working in the region is full of cultural realities, risks, and rewards.

by Susan E. Davis

Cultural Realities

Rule number one when working in the Middle East: Be willing to abide by your clients' rules, culture, and customs. Whatever the client wants, the client gets. Because that's what sheiks and princes can command—especially when it comes to schedules. Unrealistic deadlines and hurry-up-and-wait scenarios are common. When Samar Hechaime, senior wayfinding designer at Perkins+Will (Chicago), completed the design phase on a multi-use project in Mecca in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the client put it on hold for two years. Only now is it being constructed.

Lorenc+Yoo Design (Roswell, GA) has completed five projects in Dubai and is currently working on the gateway to Dubai Festival City (a 1,600-acre waterfront resort), and the Dubai International Financial Centre. Jan Lorenc, principal, says he was once put on hold for six months after interviewing for a job in Dubai. After the firm was given three weeks to make a presentation, they waited another three weeks for an appointment, only to be told on Friday that a 45-minute meeting was scheduled for the next Tuesday. (It cost Lorenc a bundle to get there on time.) But the client was late so the designer had to squeeze the presentation into 15 minutes. Then the client waited three months to finalize the deal. "The prospect of an orderly project or timeframe is out of the question," says Lorenc. "If the client causes any delay, it's fine, but we need to deliver or we're terminated."

Phil Engleke, vice president of RTKL (Baltimore), whose firm has worked on numerous projects in the Middle East over the past 20 years, says understanding Arab social protocol is a big challenge. "It's much more relationship based. Clients tend to be intensely loyal. Once they work with you over the years and trust you, they will be comfortable with you and keep throwing you projects. The Burj Boulevard client in Dubai had worked with our RTKL San Francisco office on another project so they readily accepted me."

"People in the Middle East need a level of comfort before they do business," agrees Paul Dudley, president of ID Signsystems Inc. (Rochester, NY), who previously worked for a British fabricator in Dubai. "They meet you and spend time developing a relationship. Westerners make the mistake of expecting to do business quickly. You can't hit the beach and expect to go to work there."

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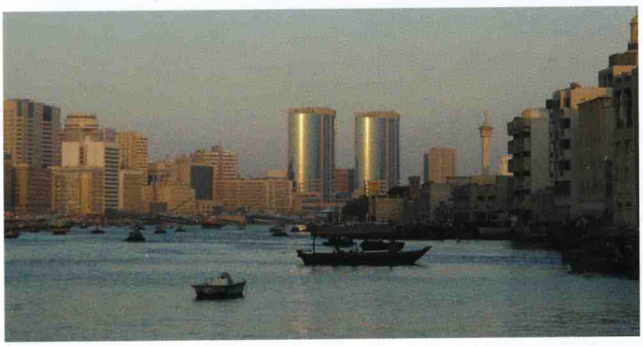
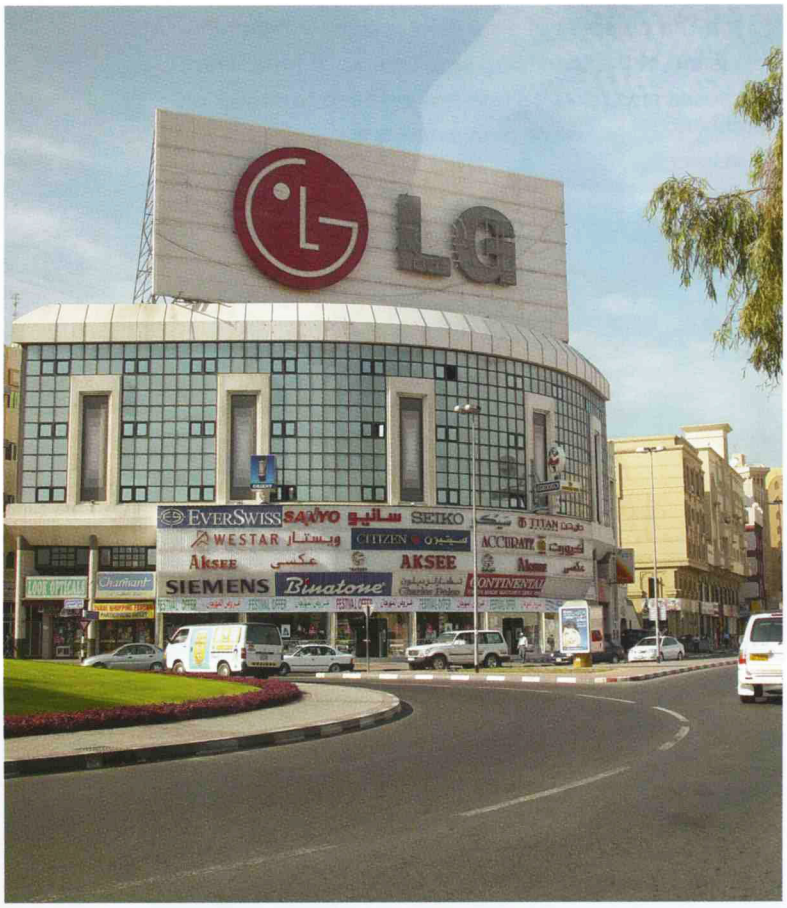


One of the biggest mistakes foreign designers can make is assuming that the culture and customs in all Middle Eastern countries are all the same. Countries like the UAE and Qatar, which were part of the British Empire until the 1970s, are at the most Westernized end of the spectrum. Though the façade there appears to be American, traditional Arabic culture persists, observes Hechaime. Saudi Arabia is at the most traditional end.

Robin Perkins, principal of Selbert Perkins Design Collaborative (Los Angeles), who heads the team designing the gateway and vehicular signage system for Dubai Festival City, calls Dubai "the Hong Kong of the Middle East" because of its cosmopolitan, sophisticated acceptance of Western business practices. She's found it "no challenge as a woman" to work with her client there.

Lorenc estimates that 95 percent of Arab men shake hands with the British woman who runs their Dubai partner firm, HQ Creative; others hold their hand against their chest in deference to Arabic custom. In contrast, Hechaime, who is Lebanese, had to meet with her Mecca, Saudi Arabia, client in Egypt. "Because I am an unmarried woman and 'Christian' is stamped on my Saudi visa, I will never actually see that project," she says.

Use of symbols—and how they may clash with regional cultures—is another reality designers must face when working in the Middle East. One symbol cannot be used anywhere in the region; for religious reasons, the human figure is totally off limits. (Bathroom icons are an exception.) While symbols for no smoking or telephone are recognized the world over, selecting a female image



for bathroom signs can be tricky. Dudley recalls a project that required lengthy debate before settling on an oblique profile of a woman in a burka.

And though designing for people with disabilities is not part of the Middle Eastern graphic tradition, Barbara Schwarzenbach, an associate with Cloud Gehshan Associates (Philadelphia), says her Qatar client requested she implement American signage and graphic design standards. Devising a hospital wayfinding system used by everyone, from illiterate tribal members to sophisticated international visitors, was a decided challenge. Another was not having clear, straight sight lines in the hospital. "The architecture honors the cultural tradition of maintaining the maximum amount of privacy in a structure."

While language is not an issue (given the region's British legacy, English is used for business transactions) subtle problems may arise when English is translated into Arabic for signage applications. Schwarzenbach says the Arabic for "elevator" had to be translated from the British vernacular "lift" in Qatar.

Problems can also arise from the many dialects used in the Arabic nations, says Dudley. He advises using Egyptians for translations from English to Arabic. "Eqyptians are authorities on written Arabic," he notes. "There are innumerable dialects in the Arabic nations, and the danger is that if you follow these, you will make some significant mistakes."

Risk Management

Generally, international firms do not work directly with Arab clients; they must work through an Arab partner or sponsor, who is responsible for lining up general contractors, project managers, fabricators, and marketing firms. "In most Arab states you need a sponsor who owns a majority stake of 51 percent even if you put up 100 percent of the capital. Many people start up a company in an industrial free zone to have 100 percent ownership," explains Rahan Merchant, whose Pakistani father set up the fabrication firm Emirates Neon in Dubai more than 30 years ago.

Lorenc+Yoo Design was hired to do projects in Dubai after the head of HQ Creations, a British firm in the UAE, spotted a golf course the American firm had designed in Florida. Cloud Gehshan Associates was hired and works through Granary Associates, an international leader in medical center architecture. Square Peg (Emeryville, CA), which has completed the Keminsky Hotel in Dubai and is working on the Dubai Mall, has worked through architectural firms for most of its projects, although now it also works directly with Emaar, the largest developer in the world.

Lorenc stresses the importance of communicating clearly with project managers and general contractors, who are often British. "You need to make sure you're on the same page," he explains. "If there is any misunderstanding about what you believe and what the Arab client believes, you can be sure you will not be defended by the UK project manager," he warns. "He who holds the bag of gold calls the shots."

Dudley reiterates the need "to be very careful in the way you act and interface with ministries and local authorities in Saudi Arabia." He recommends making sure an Arab sponsor has access to the sen-

Top, middle, bottom left: English is the official language of business in the Middle East, but signage is often a hodge-podge of English and Arabic. Since Arabic is a calligraphic type, its translation into English is challenging.

ior levels of the local political decision-making process. It took him three months of meeting and talking with people before he found an agent who had the connections and capabilities his firm needed.

"We have found the bureaucracy and resulting redundancy of effort in Dubai to be extraordinary and costly," notes Mike Moore, founding principal of Square Peg. "It seems that every project employs a formal British-based system of construction management. In a period of two months, we might have to issue a full set of documents labeled 'Issued for Tender.' Then, after the tender is awarded, issue another full set of documents—the same documents—with a new label 'Issued for Contract.' Then, in a couple of weeks, relabel all the drawings and issue them again with the label of 'Issued for Construction.' It takes days of work to label, print, collate, etc., just to be proper."

Because international firms tend to work on huge projects with many layers of bureaucracy, Hechaime recommends dealing only with the client's assigned representative. "When it comes to presenting, do it to the highest entity possible. That way you'll avoid someone misselling your work and intentions." Despite your best efforts, she adds, "Be prepared for things to go around in circles."

Clearly worded contracts help protect the quality of your work. Schwarzenbach recommends spelling out the scope of work precisely and thoroughly, especially when outlining and quantifying tasks and deliverables. Lorenc stresses the need for requesting design review during the construction document phase so projects don't "turn out to be clumsy versions of their original selves." That happens, he notes, when low-cost staff who didn't participate in the design process are hired in Dubai to detail construction.

Moore said that when his firm's oversight during construction was minimized, "The resulting quality has been OK but not optimal." To avoid that, the firm is now requesting each of 50 sign types for the Dubai Mall be prototyped, which requires a shop drawing phase just for submittals. "We've found this is the best way of working through fabrication issues and ensuring a quality project in the end. It adds time and money, but we feel it is invaluable."

"Document everything and make sure to keep references," recommends Hechaime. "The long-distance work makes that more difficult and you more vulnerable." Because the client usually picks the vendor and the designer isn't able to make recommendations, she adds, "We consider ourselves lucky when we even get to see shop drawings."

Though Perkins hasn't had problems coordinating with clients halfway around the world, Hechaime and Lorenc have. "Don't be surprised by emails on the weekend requiring attention before Monday," says Hechaime, who notes that the weekend is Friday and Saturday in Dubai and Thursday and Friday in Saudi Arabia. "Don't be surprised either by phone calls in the middle of the night. Everything is urgent, in need of immediate attention, and a good reason to panic!" After his client insisted on 9 a.m. meetings in Dubai (midnight in Georgia), Lorenc, exhausted after meetings ending at 3 a.m., was finally able to convince the client to switch calls to 9 a.m. in Georgia and 6 p.m. in Dubai.

American fabricators who think they can claim a slice of the Middle Eastern pie need to think again. Merchant, whose signage fabrication company employs 1,600 workers in four factories, reports, "Prices in the Middle East are dead low so it doesn't make sense for U.S.-based fabricators to come here." Though Moore had hoped foreign fabricators would be able to submit competitive proposals on his projects, he soon discovered that "three or four main sign fabricators in Dubai control probably 90 percent of the work."

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Above: Dubai is also home to some of the world's best shopping and restaurants. This chic cafe is in the Emirates Towers. (Photo by Jan Lorenc)

Rewards

Despite all the cultural differences and the many risks, all designers ultimately gave a thumbs up to working in the Middle East. Noting a huge percentage of RTKL's business is international, Engleke points out that deadlines in the Middle East were "not as bad as in other parts of the world." Though Schwarzenbach admits it was difficult working second-hand through an architectural firm, she welcomed the chance to delve into a different culture. "We really enjoyed the research process and learned a lot about Islamic art, culture, and recreation as a result."

Noting that opportunities in the Middle East are vast and lucrative, Lorenc sums up his work as a designer in the region: "The things that are being built in Dubai are not built anywhere else in the world and the rate of growth of this metropolis is so fast-paced that it's unbelievable. But it could be done cheaper and of better quality if more owners were to stick to full-service consulting. We can bring order to the chaos. I hope clients realize what it takes to build a sense of place. It's not just iconography and unique ego towers." ☒

Susan E. Davis has been writing about graphic design for more than 20 years for a variety of magazines, including *Step-By-Step Graphics, HOW, Graphis,* and *I.D.*

Ibn Battuta Mall

Formerly an outlet mall, the Ibn Battuta Mall was transformed into a 1.5 million-sq.-ft. upscale shopping center including 275 retailers, a 21-screen megaplex and IMAX theater, a fitness center, and a hypermarket. The mall's architecture and environmental graphic design were inspired by the travels of Ibn Battuta, the legendary 14th century Arabian explorer.

Location
Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Client
Nakheel

Architecture and Conceptual Environmental Graphic Design
Callison

Design Team
Ro Shroff (principal in charge), Esmeraldo Formantes, Michel Hebrant, Howard Fitzpatrick

Photos
Callison/Chris Eden

Above: Elaborate mosaic tiles, authentic domed ceilings, and traditional interior arches identify the Persia court.

Above: The China-themed court features detailed ceilings and a life-size replica of a Chinese junk.

Above: Shoppers can experience six themed courts representing regions visited by Ibn Buttuta: Egypt, Andalusia, Tunisia, Persia, India, and China.

Burj Boulevard

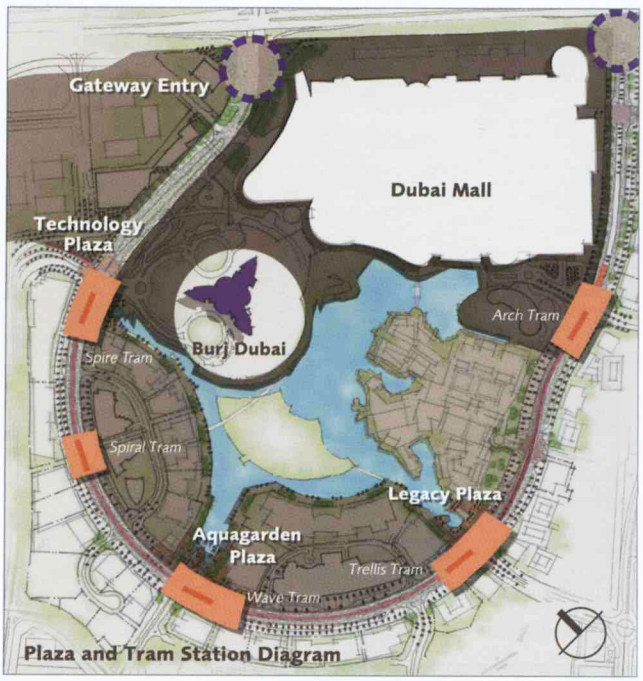
The Burj Boulevard project skirts the perimeter of the huge residential, retail, and business environment that includes Burj Tower (the tallest building in the world at 2,625 ft.) and the massive Dubai Mall. RTKL's role was to create environmental graphics that unify the disparate elements and provide a "journey" through the vast complex.

Location
Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Client
Emaar Properties

Design
RTKL Associates

Design Team
Phil Engleke (vice president in charge), Giuseppe DiVanna (project manager), Derek Friday (senior environmental graphic designer), Bob Gorman (principal in charge, landscape and urban planning), Warren Timlen (senior landscape designer), Meghan Fiske (senior landscape designer), Alice Jones (landscape designer)



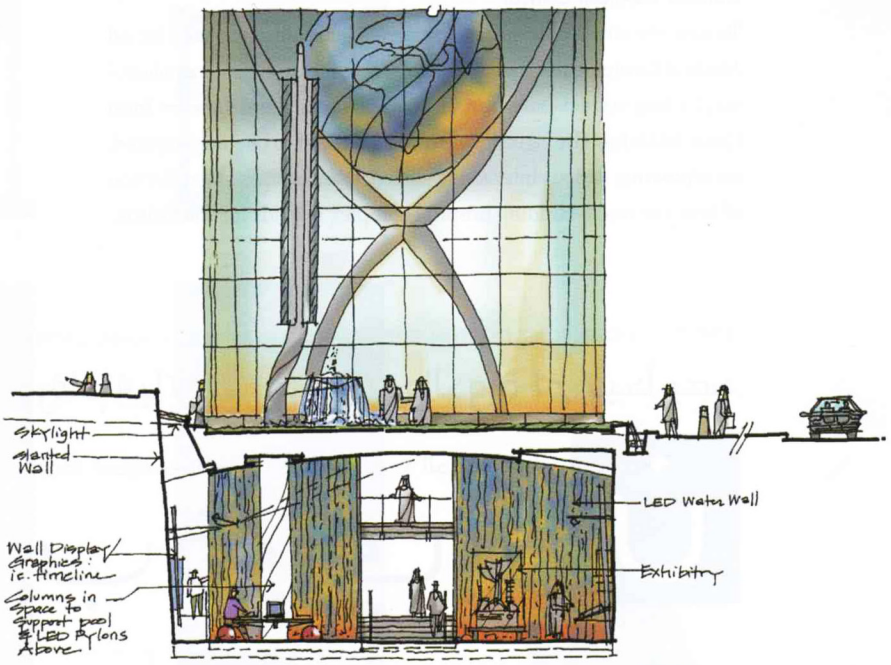
Plaza and Tram Station Diagram

Right: The roadway was designed to function as the central nervous system connecting the elements of the project. RTKL designed five tram stations, along with extensive landscaping, gateways, paving, signage, and lighting, to convey different but integrated street experiences along the boulevard.

Below: This Water Tram Station is near Aquagarden Plaza, a civic gathering place with dramatic views of the lake, fountain, and Burj Tower. The RTKL team researched the intricate geometric patterns and textures used in Middle Eastern design to create unique forms for each station, in this case a pattern that recalls the ripple effects of water. The patterns are repeated on streetside kiosks, paving, and roofing. The rooftop design was important since the station will be viewed from the many tall buildings in the development.

Dubai International Financial Centre

Though the Dubai International Financial Centre, which aims to have the same stature as New York, London, and Hong Kong, opened in 2004, it wasn't until a year later that the client hired Lorenc+Yoo Design to create interactive signage and an information/visitor center for the gateway building. Lorenc+Yoo proposed a central reception cube with a visitor center and lower-level museum, a series of 10 huge LED multimedia boards with constantly changing international news, and a streamer with financial news running around the top of the gateway building. The project, which would require, according to Jan Lorenc, "significant restructuring of the existing buildings," is still in design review, and the construction timeline is not known.



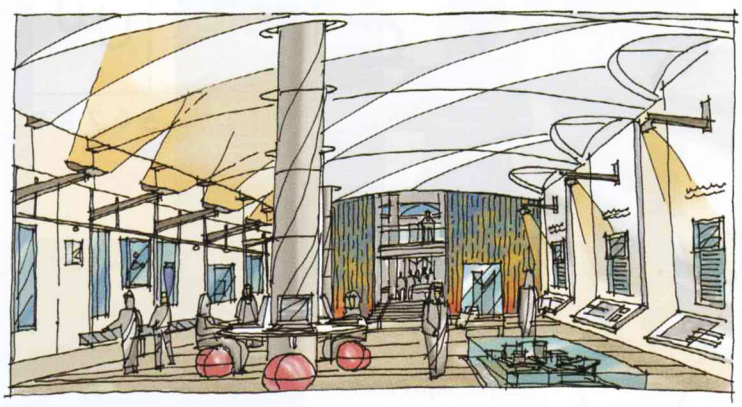
Location
Dubai, United Arab Emirates

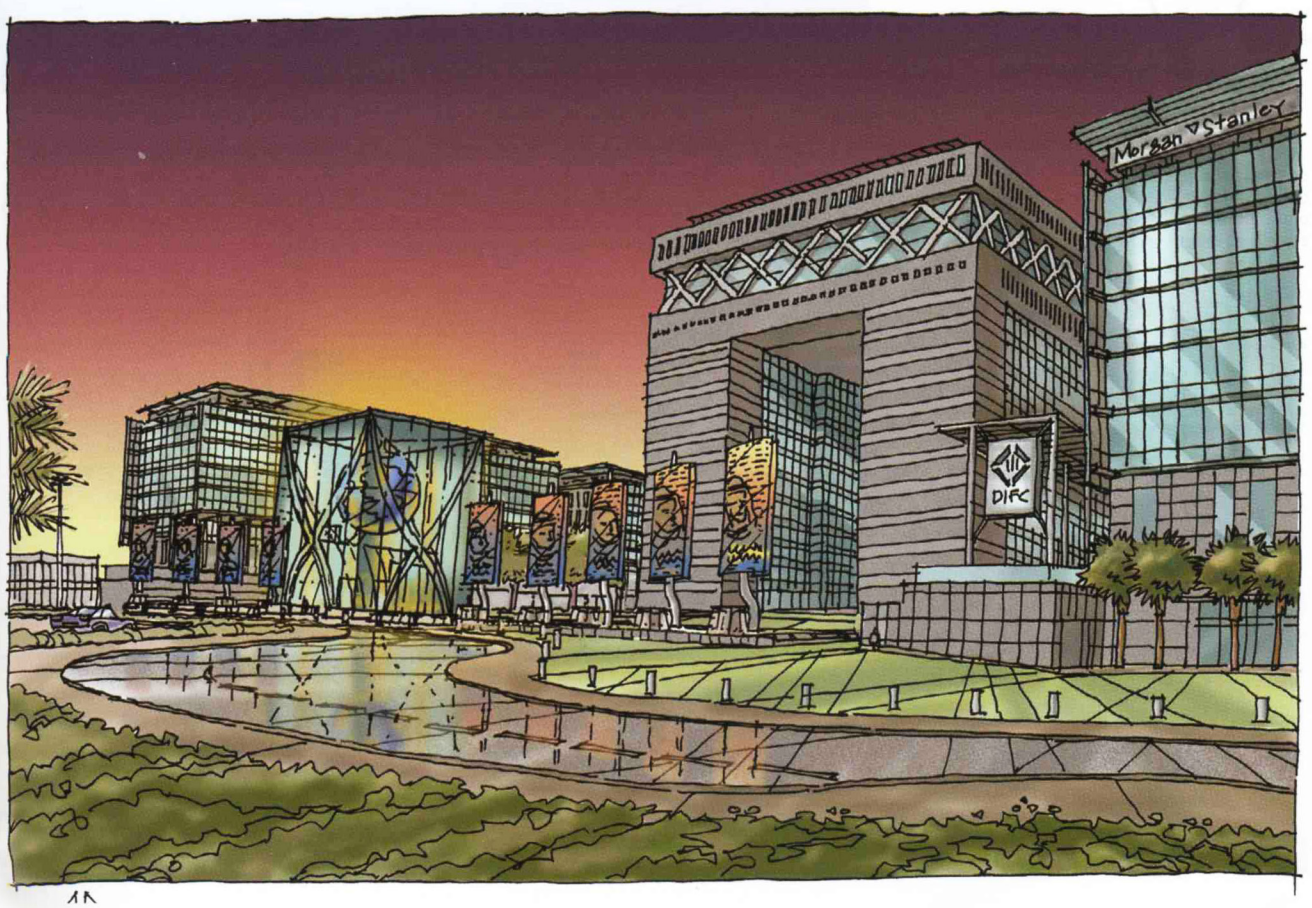
Dubai Partner
HQ Creative

Design
Lorenc+Yoo Design

Design Team
Jan Lorenc (design director), Steve McCall (designer), Jisun An (assistant designer)

Multimedia Boards
The Barnycz Group





Qibla Cultural Center

The Kuwait National Museum, once a treasure trove of Islamic art and culture, was looted and burned during the 1990 invasion by Iraq. Under the auspices of UNESCO, the collection was returned relatively intact, and the museum is now being rebuilt as the Qibla Cultural Center, a 12-building campus encompassing two museums, a national library, a performing arts center, and historical mosques and homes. As part of an international consulting team, Graham Hanson Design (New York) is providing branding and identity design services as well as interior and exterior wayfinding. ☒

Location
Kuwait City, Kuwait

Client
Government of Kuwait

Architect
Imrey Culbert LP

Administrative Architect
Pace Architects

Identity and Environmental Graphic Design
Graham Hanson Design

Design Team
Graham Hanson, Eileen Moore, Se Ra Yoon

Lighting Design
Arup

Below: To match the interior architectural finishes, cantilevered wayfinding signs are brushed bronze with acid-etched and paint-filled custom symbol graphics. Exposed surfaces of aluminum core are painted to match bronze finishes.

Below: The entrance to the museum is flanked by 220cm customized stainless steel monoliths featuring an alternating etched pattern. The monoliths are mounted directly into existing paving and are externally lit. Graphics and type are acid-etched and paint-filled to coordinate with the overall identity program.

Typical Inside Spread

Brochure Cover

Above: Hanson created a comprehensive identity system for the center, encompassing not only signage, but stationery, web site, museum tickets and visitor tags, and brochures. They also assisted in naming the centers' core cultural elements.

Below: The Hanson team created a stylized Q as the center's overarching identity. It echoes the geometry found in typical Islamic architecture. Hanson also devised identities and color palettes for the Qibla's four cultural branches: the Museum of Islamic Art (whose logo references a square calligraphic form called a kufic), the Kuwait National Museum (whose logo recalls traditional weaving patterns), the National Library of Kuwait (with a logo that represents the leaves of a palm tree and/or a manuscript), and Historical Architecture of Kuwait (whose logo stylizes the iconic entry door in Islamic architecture).